

Heirloom Jewelry:  
An Actant of History and Identity

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **Heirloom Jewelry: An Actant of History and Identity**

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Heirloom jewelry pieces perform important functions in family networks. Jewelry's durability allows the potential to frequently outlive its original owner, gain sentimental value over successive generations, and influence relationships. Through the frame of Actor-Network-Theory and using a case study methodology, this study analyzed three participants' heirloom rings functions in conjunction with their oral accounts of family history. Rings were chosen as a specific format of heirloom jewelry in order to limit the scope of the research, and because of their generalized usage. Interviews concentrated on the history of their heirloom ring's origins, the participant's view on ownership of a family heirloom, and other relevant family history.

This research sought to unite material context and historical context in order to examine the importance of objects in social interactions. Specifically, the research investigated the roles heirloom jewelry enacts in family narratives and interactions. The research found that heirloom jewelry, even as an inanimate object, can exert social influence through the mediation and moderation of family relationships. Furthermore, the research showed that heirloom enacts identity and culture, and is a valuable medium to facilitate both art and social history education.

Key terms: heirloom, jewelry, tradition, Actor-Network-Theory, art, craft, material, metal, gemstone, oral history, art education

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Davis, co-captain of Team Trainwreck.

*Nescire autem quid ante quam natus sis acciderit, id est semper esse puerum.  
Quid enim est aetas hominis, nisi ea memoria rerum veterum cum superiorum  
aetate contextitur?*

To be ignorant of what occurred before you were born is to remain always a child.  
For what is the worth of human life, unless it is woven into the life of our  
ancestors by the records of history?

Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Orator*

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **1.1 Introduction**

Jewelry has been produced for functional and decorative purposes for millennia. Its appearance as both a physical artifact and as a major component of narratives, from ancient myths to modern family history, expresses its significance as a historical object. It functions in diverse capacities, from its use as a talisman to its outward signification of its wearer's wealth or status. Despite being an inanimate object, jewelry can also play a role in human interactions, potentially strengthening, defining, or straining relationships.

The inherent physical qualities and the acquired attributes of heirloom jewelry, in particular, complicate its presence in family interactions. Because jewelry is often made from precious metals and prized gemstones, it can be of high monetary value. Alternatively, it can be largely sentimental – less an investment and more a symbol. Regardless of a jewelry piece's value, however, well-crafted pieces can hold up to many years of wear.

The relatively small size and longevity of well-crafted jewelry allow heirloom pieces, in particular, to become useful educational tools because they provide a tangible link to history. Heirloom jewelry can provide a glimpse into family traditions and customs, while simultaneously allowing current owners to recall memories that help construct their own identity and place themselves within a family timeline or hierarchy.

The present research examined three heirloom rings through their owner's accounts of family history, views on tradition and ownership, and interpretations of how these interwoven concepts influenced their outlook and values. The participants' jewelry helps them recall their ancestors, thereby sparking the retelling of associated memories. Each participant's story is unique, but the commonalities across the three diverse cases illustrate how heirloom jewelry can play an important part in building and maintaining a family narrative.

### **1.2 Purpose**

Jewelry is a familiar accessory, given, received, and worn for a wide range of occasions. It is an art form (i.e., an object made with intent), and a medium of communication. Heirloom jewelry can also be a cultural mediator, highlighting intense personal relationships and helping to remember memories of a specific person, time, or place. Because of this strong connection, these objects are useful for helping recall, illustrate, and teach history.



This research examines the ability of objects to exert influence and function within social contexts. These concepts will be informed by Actor-Network-Theory (ANT). ANT will serve as the theoretical framework for the research, as it provides a philosophical basis for the ways in which actors (both human and non-human) work together to form and maintain networks (e.g., a community or family). The research will specifically investigate how heirloom jewelry is a part of familial and socio-historical narratives, in order to build a greater understanding of how these familiar, enduring art objects can be used in an educational context.

### **1.3 Research Questions and Objective**

- How does heirloom jewelry function within family history?
- What narratives does it perpetuate?
- What associations does it strengthen?
- How has the object changed since its creation?

The research's objective is to trace specific objects' associations through time, in an effort to understand the social influence and educational utility of objects. By identifying the ways in which jewelry is a part of family history, this research aims to further the understanding of heirloom jewelry as functional art objects.

### **1.4 Justification and Rationale**

This thesis will show that gaining an understanding of everyday objects is an insightful and useful way to engage with the decorative arts, and jewelry in particular. Jewelry, traditionally understood as a decorative art (rather than a "fine art"), is an everyday art format that is familiar to a variety of people. It crosses socioeconomic divides and possesses essentially worldwide appeal. Jewelry is ubiquitous in modern culture: from earrings, to belt buckles, to necklaces, to cufflinks, it is a part of everyday dress for both men and women.

Heirloom jewelry exists in many styles and types. The present research examines rings (as a specific jewelry format) in order to provide a narrow focus and unity across cases to reach the stated objectives. I chose rings to study specifically because of their relative universality: rings are often given or received as part of a cultural tradition, but are not always a part of a specific tradition; many ring types are understood to be objects of daily wear; additionally, rings are worn by men and women alike. Well-made rings also tend to be a longer-lasting format of jewelry, showing wear but not wearing out beyond repair until after many decades of daily use because of their lack of moving parts (as opposed to bracelets and necklaces, which wear out relatively quickly

when worn daily). They also are made in an endless variety of styles, reflecting personal taste – they can be different metals, different sizes and shapes, and may or may not have gemstones set in various ways depending on the owner’s preferences. Because of these many characteristics, rings have a broad appeal, and provide the current research with a strong foundation of interesting data.

My interest in this subject is the result of almost a decade of study in the jewelry field, both academic- and trade-based, coupled with personal experience. I am the fortunate custodian of several heirlooms from my own family, which – long prior to beginning this research – catalyzed my interest in family history. The objects made or purchased by my ancestors long passed have allowed me a peek into their interests and their ways of life. By researching and understanding these objects, they have brought pieces of the past into view, and allowed me to better appreciate my family’s traditions and heritage.

As a result of my own change in perspective, I fascinated by others’ stories and experiences regarding family heirlooms. As the adage goes, “Everybody has a story” – and physical objects like jewelry can help unearth those stories. I believe that other peoples’ stories are just as important as my own, and I specifically sought participants from outside my immediate family for this reason. Although my family’s history is a driving personal interest for me, I firmly believe that sharing knowledge and recording others’ stories will give a much more vibrant picture of the common experiences people from varied backgrounds may share, and how specific, charged objects can elicit memory and emotion.

Personal stories and intense connections to familiar objects can be used to great benefit in art educational settings. In addition to my interest in heirlooms, this research is derived from my experience of attending art and archaeology museums with friends and family. I always stop to observe the jewelry in these museums, fascinated by the minute details, craftsmanship, and technologies it exhibits. Other visitors pass these easily overlooked items by, instead searching for readily familiar (and admittedly more dramatic) paintings and sculptures. My companions often return several minutes later to find me mesmerized, and their interest is piqued by these diminutive items as I answer their inevitable questions.

Jewelry – although not always understood as such – is an art form. Unlike many other media, it possesses the advantage of being a visible part of daily life for millennia with relatively little change in intent. Jewelry functions in society, and jewelry enacts culture: it is an inanimate object that enlivens stories. It is both a mediator and a moderator of culture.

I hope that readers will recognize commonalities between these participants' stories and their own family history, and that they will be inspired to research their own family history and heirloom objects as a result of this research. Additionally, it is my hope that by understanding jewelry pieces as art objects, readers and future museum-goers will understand the jewelry they see behind the vitrines in art and archaeology museums as items similar to the jewelry they wear today, constructing a greater understanding of how the past gave rise to the present.

## **1.5 Organization**

The thesis will begin with a literature review, situating the present questions and objectives in existing historical, educational, and sociological literatures. Building upon this literature, I will concisely describe the theoretical framework of Actor-Network-Theory, which provides a way to understand how objects can play a role in, and influence, human interactions. Next, the research methodology of case studies will be described, followed by a complete description and analysis of each of the three cases in Chapter 5. The thesis will conclude with suggestions for applying these ideas in educational settings and implications for future research on similar topics.

## **1.6 Terminology**

*Heirloom* – an object that has been passed down through multiple generations in a family.

*Actor-Network-Theory* – (ANT) – a theory that attempts to describe and account for the effects objects can have on human interactions.

*Mediator* – Something that “explain[s] how external physical events take on internal psychological significance . . . [and the] relationship between two variables” (Baron & Kenny, 1986, p. 1174)

*Moderator* – Something that “specifies when certain effects will hold . . . [and] influences the strength of a relationship between two other variables” (Baron & Kenny, 1986, p.1176)

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### 2.1 Function and Scope

Jewelry is a decorative art form that has existed for thousands of years. Beyond jewelry's frequent presence in ancient archaeological sites, specific jewelry pieces are parts of centuries-old myths. In myth, jewelry pieces perform various functions, which are similar to modern usages: as objects of protection, value, identity, or power, jewelry connects individuals to each other within social networks. The following sections will discuss specific myths and functions in greater detail, drawing from both classical history and modern literatures.

Heirloom jewelry functions in a similar manner as jewelry in myth, as it is also often accompanied by oral history. However, although oral history can provide a useful historical record, it also presents challenges, as it is shaped by individual viewpoints and aims (Hoskins, 1998). Nevertheless, the individuality of stories and related objects are useful in educational contexts because they can help provide students with a clearer understanding of how the past shaped the present (Lawton & La Porte, 2013).

As the current research examined how jewelry functions within family history and its social influence, this review will begin by approaching jewelry from a historical vantage point. Because jewelry perpetuates and influences history in various ways, this review will then move to the functions of jewelry, followed by a brief description of issues and benefits associated with oral history. Finally, the review will end with educational uses of objects within museum curatorship and programming, and briefly within school curricula. Through the understanding of heirloom jewelry's relation to memory, history, and expression, as well as its social and cultural prominence, this review aims to broaden the understanding of jewelry's utility specifically within arts education.

### 2.2 Jewelry in Myth

Beyond its physical presence in archaeological sites worldwide, jewelry has also been a part of narratives for millennia. Within Western and Near-Eastern mythology, various jewelry pieces appear as an active part of stories in Greek, Norse, and Abrahamic traditions. In the three myths described below, singular pieces of jewelry function in different ways: representing identity, granting power, and protecting their wearers.

**Brisingamen.** An example from Norse mythology, *Brisingamen* is Freya's necklace. Freya, the goddess of beauty, is described as being fond of accessories and pretty clothing. As one

myth describes, she saw dwarves making a necklace and was compelled to purchase it because of its unparalleled beauty. She wore it so often that it eventually became a symbol of her, it acquired its own name. *Brisingamen* is mentioned by name in several Eddic poems, two of which will be described here in brief (based on Guerber, 1909/2006).

In one story, Thor needed to impersonate Freya as part of a scheme to regain his hammer (Mjollnir) from a giant. None of the gods would let Freya go herself as it was too dangerous for her to engage with the giants, so Thor dressed in her clothes – most notably, wearing her necklace *Brisingamen*. Because her clothing and accessories were so identifiable, Thor successfully fooled the giants into believing his fake identity through his appearance, and regaining Mjollnir. In another story Loki, the trickster god, desired *Brisingamen* so much that he stole it outright from Freya. After a series of odd events (including gods changing into various animals), Freya ultimately recovered the necklace with the help of Heimdall, the watchman.

These Norse stories show two ways in which jewelry can be a part of narratives. First, jewelry can be a visible representation of identity. *Brisingamen* was so closely associated with Freya that the giants (although known not to be the smartest creatures) never second-guessed Thor's appearance. They saw an item that represented Freya, and assumed it her. This story shows the close association between wearable objects and identity, which is also present in modern heirlooms: an object that is closely associated with, or representative of an individual will remind the wearer (and others) of that person. Although modern heirlooms cannot create the same magical disguise that a mythical object would, an heirloom object still possesses agency in that it reminds others of a specific person. In the second story, Loki demonstrates another, unhappier result of the agency of jewelry. Objects that are more beautiful, or more special (potentially through monetary or sentimental value), have the potential to cause jealousy and resentment between kin. Although *Brisingamen* is not an heirloom piece in this story, the necklace moderates an unpleasant relationship between two related individuals. It is an important part of the interactions between characters.

**Seal of Solomon.** This magical signet ring gave Solomon the power to command demons, djinn, and depending on the source's tradition, also understand animals. It is described most notably in the *Arabian Nights*, in the "Tale of the Brass City", but appears in other stories as well. The ring serves as an extension and amplifier of Solomon's famous wisdom, allowing him to issue commands to supernatural beings and protect himself.

Signet rings are a format of jewelry directly associated with identity, possessing a personal symbol in reverse relief. The symbol on a signet ring would have been identifiable to others, and would have been used to stamp wax seals on official correspondence before most people were literate. Beyond this direct representation of identity, The Seal of Solomon functions in these stories as a talisman, granting magical powers and helping bring good fortune to Solomon. Its agency lies in its ability to grant abilities. Although again, modern jewelry is not able to grant magical powers in the way myths describe, people still often have a “good luck charm,” or wear heirloom items for auspicious occasions.

**Ring of Gyges.** This famous parable is described by Plato in *Republic*, Book II, and has been used as an example by numerous ancient orators to frame debates on morality. In this story, Gyges, a poor shepherd, finds an innocuous-looking ring, and quickly discovers that when turned a specific way on his finger, the ring grants him the power of invisibility. In short, Gyges uses this power to commit a series of increasingly unlawful acts (Plato, trans. 1992). This parable is a take on human morality, and presents the idea that unlimited authority without oversight leads to criminal acts.

The Ring of Gyges functions as a major part of the plot in this parable. It does not have its own volition, but grants invisibility – an inanimate object, animated. Without the mystical properties of the ring, Gyges would have simply remained a poor shepherd, but with it, he absconds with the queen and conquers a kingdom. The ring’s granting of power is essential to the events in this parable.

Notably, the Ring of Gyges bears striking resemblance to another (albeit modern) mythical ring: the “One Ring” from J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. In Tolkien’s books, however, the ring actively corrupts its wearer over time, presenting a different path to moral deterioration. Instead of enabling corruption, it is the express cause.

Nonetheless, these two rings’ endowment of magical powers make them an active part of plots – essentially, as actors in a storyline. The Ring of Gyges, by granting a spectacular ability, acts as a medium for power to Gyges. That is, the ring itself is impartial, but provides the impetus for Gyges to commit his increasingly immoral deeds. Tolkien’s One Ring, on the other hand, is a negatively charged object that actively corrupts its wearer. It is an actor, although it does not speak or otherwise verbally contribute to the plot. In *The Lord of the Rings*, the plot centers on the innately good wearer of the ring, Frodo, being gradually turned into an evil creature, and being

unable to ultimately let go of the ring. Of course, this description is a gross oversimplification of a wonderful and rich storyline, but in essence, the One Ring creates a push and pull between good and evil, and its activity and agency result in the plot's driving forces. Furthermore, both of these imaginary rings also show the covetousness that can be present with jewelry ownership, and exemplify functionality of objects – albeit in these cases, closely tied to magical function.

### **2.3 Jewelry as a Functional Artifact**

In modern life, jewelry performs similar functions as in these myths – as a reflection of identity, as a manifestation of power, and as a talisman. These abilities and functions, however real or imaginary, were integral to the identity of the previously described mythical pieces' wearers, and connect to jewelry's historical designation as a decorative art, and predominantly, a craft. Craft objects are handmade objects with function. The functionality of crafts, and particularly jewelry, is what makes them such an important part of daily life. The following sections will focus on the representative functions of jewelry, and why jewelry forms a familiar part of daily life.

**Protection.** One function of jewelry is as a talisman. In the charming early twentieth century investigation *The Curious Lore of Precious Stones*, geologist George Frederick Kunz explains the protective properties that people often believe their jewelry possesses:

It is not the object itself, but the idea for which it stands and which it incorporates, that gives confidence to the wearer, and in this sense the wearing of a talisman is no more proof of blind superstition than is the devotion to a flag, in itself only a few square feet of silk or bunting, but, nevertheless, the symbol of the noblest ideas and feelings, of patriotic devotion to one's native land and to one's fellow-countrymen. The tendency to give a substantial visible form to an abstract idea is so deeply rooted in humanity that it must be looked upon as responding to a human necessity. It is only very rarely that purely intellectual conceptions can satisfy us; they must be given some external, palpable and visible form to exert their greater influences. (Kunz, 1913, p.26)

Though this text is over a century old, this purpose has not changed. Tangible forms help represent internal ideas, giving form to an abstract idea. By attributing objects with immaterial properties, the properties seem more real.

Birthstones, a familiar sight in modern commercial jewelry, have their origins in talismans. The idea of stones representing certain qualities and months is attributed to the ancient historians Josephus and St. Jerome, who used Biblical symbols to support their connections (Kunz, 1913).

Specific gemstones have been thought to possess beneficial qualities for centuries: for instance, emeralds were thought to resolve their wearers' sight problems, while topaz was believed to help its wearer find true love. With the advent of modern medicine these beliefs have been disproven, but have not completely disappeared (as evidenced by the dumbfounding popularity of crystal healing in naturopathy). Regardless of these qualities, however, birthstones remain a popular fashion statement, and are marketed heavily by jewelry companies throughout the world.

**Identity.** With the advent of the industrial revolution, jewelry began to be widely mass-produced in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. This trend expanded in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. One period source states that because of "the introduction of modern systems, great quantities can now be sold, which, though not preserving the character of the finest handiwork . . . cost so much less to produce that they can now be offered at greatly reduced prices." (Kunz, 1917, p.335). At this time, jewelry became less expensive, and began to be purchased by a greater range of people. However, regardless of material origin (whether mass-produced and purchased or tediously handmade) jewelry reflects its owners' decision to create or buy, and to display.

The three cases presented in Chapter 5 are examples of twentieth century mass-production, a result of limiting human handwork to limit overall cost. However, objects that originate as mass-produced goods can diverge from their generic origins, becoming imbued with individual significance (Hoskins, 1998). This can be attributed to a variety of factors, but the key concept is that objects' material origins can become less important than their contextual (i.e., sentimental) significance.

Context is an important part of defining one's identity. The "self" is a concept that is constructed, negotiated between an individual within their environment. Jewelry is visible way to convey identity within a given environment: "Jewels in actuality and representation function as a touchstone for emergent and changing concepts of the individual in relation to society" (Pointon, 2009, p.13). Because jewelry can be tried on, worn, and taken off, it represents fluctuating views on oneself in a given situation. That is, jewelry can be appropriate for certain occasions, and not for others: spectacular diamond chandelier earrings would appropriately accompany an evening gown at a red-carpet event, but not pajamas at bedtime following the red-carpet event. The individual's behavior and sense of "self" would also change in these situations, matching their attire. Jewelry can be displayed according to specific needs, or removed/concealed when necessary.



**Value.** Jewelry's link to identity is also, in many ways, linked to its value. The display of wealth through the wearing of fine jewelry is a timeless practice (for an overview, see Kunz, 1917). However, jewelry can be of high monetary value, it can be more sentimental in value, or it can be both – and in some cases, neither.

This conflict arises from the issue that jewelry's value is an attributed quality, and not intrinsic. Gemstones are valuable because culture deems them to be:

Once cut and polished, a diamond moves from being precious raw material to being a desired acculturated artifact ... The faceted diamond retains the ambiguity of nature turned into art, of dirt become finery, of what is useless attaining superlative value. (Pointon, 2009, p.44)

Value, both monetary and sentimental, is a social construction. Gemstone jewelry exemplifies this particularly well, as it is a familiar, and sometimes coveted, part of contemporary life.

However, many vintage and antique objects also display how value is a social construction. The television program *Antiques Roadshow* highlights mass popular interest in knowing the value of unidentified objects, especially heirlooms. During each segment, appraisers give participants an estimated value of an object. The appraisers begin by asking participants where their antique (often a family heirloom, but sometimes a purchased antique) came from and how much they paid for it, and then give a brief historical background to the object based on their material clues. Finally, they assign a monetary value to the object (either retail, auction, or insurance estimates – which are differing ways to assign monetary value; again, value is shown to be a relative idea). The show is entertaining not only from a historical perspective, but also from the surprise of what everyday objects are worth an unexpected amount of money, and which are not. Furthermore, participants' stories (and assumptions) regarding their antiques' provenance are frequently very different from what the appraisers either know about the origin of similar objects, or deduce from the item's style or markings. This program's popularity shows that many people have a great interest in where their personal possessions come from, and highlights the often-intertwined relationship between monetary value, sentimental value, and family relationships.

**Power and Ownership.** Jewelry's ties to identity and value also link to power, particularly through the arrangement of family relationships and ownership of property. But the concept of power through ownership most relies on the ability of heirloom jewelry to place the "self" within a social environment. "The distinction between an heirloom and junk is . . . the successful semiotic

management of the social context” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 76). A family network can be the “social context” to which Appadurai refers, and objects given between family members become heirlooms rather than junk because of the relationships and stories that accompany them. For instance, inheriting specific jewelry because of birth order would be an example of a power dynamic within a social context: first grandchildren are sometimes given preferential treatment, for no other reason than being the eldest. Additionally, it is a common custom for daughters (rather than sons) to inherit their mother’s jewelry, also identifying placement within a family hierarchy. Of course, this does not happen in every family, but it is connected to the “management” that Appadurai describes. These traditions contribute to the creation and representation of identity, a product of actively deciding how to represent oneself within a relativistic family setting.

One way that individuals may place themselves within familial context is by telling stories: “The act of telling a story is itself an effort to construct narrative coherence, a way of asking oneself, ‘What kind of story am I in?’” (Hoskins, 1998, p.180). Learning and re-telling family history, for example, is one way to place oneself within a family hierarchy. Furthermore, sharing this narrative repeatedly can also be a way to reaffirm or justify rightful ownership of heirloom jewelry by consolidating memories.

## **2.4 History and Historiography**

**Oral History.** Oral accounts are a useful means to collect historical information. Oral history “allows the researcher to document what the person has lived through and to analyze this information for underlying meanings and significance that such an event or a time period has for the informant” (Chaitin, 2008, p.583). It can also supply information unavailable from other sources, and allow ordinary people to contribute to the historical record (Chaitin, 2008). With regards to the present research, the possibility for augmenting material information regarding heirloom jewelry with personal context is highly useful: one can supplement the other for a more complete picture of a family network.

However, oral history also presents challenges. Notably, “No account, not even the subject’s own, is transparently ‘true’” (Hoskins, 1998, p.179). Each storyteller’s viewpoint is shaped by his or her own experience and values. At many times, the participants in the current study were unsure of the full story of their heirloom rings, only presenting their personal experience and saying that they would have to check with another family member to be sure of

specific facts. However, presenting one's own side of a story does not necessarily make a story any less true, or any false – it simply reflects personal experience.

A pop-culture example of family history as told through oral history is found in the television series *Finding Your Roots with Henry Louis Gates Jr.* Dr. Gates, a historian at Harvard University, researches celebrity guests' genealogies, and reveals them to the guests over the course of an episode. The presented stories interweave family oral history with heavily researched historical records (including census and military records), and often surprise the guests with previously unknown specifics about their ancestors. It is not uncommon for the guests' ancestors to set their pasts aside, and not pass down information about the "old country" – instead, they focused on beginning a new life in their adopted country, and improving their lives and their children's lives. Although this does not occur in every family, it provides anecdotal support to the mutability of historical family narrative.

**Historical (Mis)construction.** Aptly quipped, "If you do not like the past, change it." (Burton, 1982, p. 14). The past can be reconfigured according to present needs – and this can occur through the re-creation, re-telling, or conspicuous omission of narratives in family history. This is exemplified in *Finding Your Roots* in a public way, but occurs in many non-celebrity families as well. The mutability of memories and the selectivity of sharing are important factors to remember in oral history research, as a participant may be altering a story to suit their own ends, or they may be repeating a narrative that an ancestor previously altered. Although successive generations re-telling an altered story may not be actively misrepresenting an idea, it is possible that as a result, family history could be in conflict with other accepted historical narratives.

History is sometimes described as a winner's narrative, with existing accounts either written or protected by winners of wars. In oral history, this is no different: narratives are recounted by survivors, both human and material. Surviving artifacts and stories can give a record of history, but the particular record described is changed as time passes (Lowenthal, 1985). The material aspects of enduring objects can support historical record, but need historical context in order to be fully understood.

Interconnected but distinct concepts, memory and history illustrate different aspects of the past. Objects relate to both, particularly with the passing of generations:

By its nature personal and hence largely unverifiable, memory extends back only to childhood, though we do accrete to our own recollections those told us by forebears. By

contrast, history, whose shared data and conclusions must be open to public scrutiny, extends back to or beyond the earliest records of civilization. The death of each individual totally extinguishes countless memories, whereas history (at least in print) is potentially immortal. Yet all history depends on memory, and many recollections incorporate history. (Lowenthal, 1985, p.xxii)

Interviews, as memorial recollections, focus on certain questions and concepts, but it is the participant's decision to share what they believe most salient. Further, the way in which the story is told about an object can be just as important as the object itself. As Edmund de Waal describes in his family-centered narrative, *The Hare with the Amber Eyes*:

How objects are handed on is all about story-telling. I am giving you this because I love you. Or because it was given to me. Because I bought it somewhere special. Because you will care for it. Because it will complicate your life. Because it will make someone else envious. There is no easy story in legacy. (De Waal, 2011, p.17)

Surviving objects add another dimension to family history, partially because of their perceived value, but also because of the many ways in which they can illustrate history and capture modern interest.

## **2.5 Object-Based Learning**

Because objects can engage with many aspects of history, they are especially useful in educational contexts – in museums, in classrooms, and in less-formal situations as well. The article “Teaching Yourself to Teach with Objects” highlights four beneficial aspects of objects (Shuh, 1999): first, and most simply, objects are interesting; second, although objects are interpreted differently by different age groups, they do not require a reading level like text does (i.e., objects can be understood by adults and children alike); third, objects provide a record of peoples' lives through their manufacture and use; and finally, objects help promote critical thinking skills. By questioning what an object may be, its possible use, or even how to improve its function, people of all ages are required to think beyond simple categorization (Shuh, 1999). Together, these four aspects of objects demonstrate how objects facilitate learning in ways that two-dimensional or text-based media cannot.

Furthermore, objects are best understood in situ (Vallance, 2008). This presents difficulties when viewing objects in museum settings, behind glass and outside of daily life. Vallance (2008) uses both fine art and craft objects to illustrate this point: among her examples, a Paul Revere sugar

urn, and 17<sup>th</sup>-century Dutch still life paintings. Both objects, now in museum collections, are removed from their original homes, and their current placement demonstrates the difference between a collected object and an everyday object:

Much of what is now in art museums was once part of the everyday lives of people – not always “ordinary” objects in “ordinary” lives, for so much that was excellent enough for curators to save was part of the lifestyle of the rich and famous, but still lived-with and used and only rarely enshrined in domestic displays that kept them apart from their context of use. (Vallance, 2008, p.49)

The transient relationship between artifacts found in daily life and those displayed in museums is key: the former can become the latter, and viewers’ understanding of the object changes based on its context.

Museum-based learning is a social activity, which can take place in small family groups or large socio-cultural groups (Hein, 1998). The social context of a museum-goer is a determining factor of their personal views (Falk & Dierking, 1991), which is complicated by the situation of an artwork in a gallery space (Hein, 1998). Curators recognize this interplay, and through it aim to convey an object’s story to the public through their careful arrangement of items. However, “an object can resonate for one person differently than for somebody else” (Carding, 2014, p.10). This is a result of a museum visitor’s existing perspective and outlook.

One particularly successful example of curating artifacts in museums to subvert context can be found in the work of artist Fred Wilson. His influential 1992 exhibition *Mining the Museum*, along with subsequent site-specific exhibitions, have each been comprised of reorganizing and redistributing museum collections in order to create dialogues between objects through their proximity. The latent histories of the objects allow them to illuminate another side of history, creating a meta-narrative that differs from conventional historical narrative (Corrin, 1994). Wilson’s work exemplifies the ways in which objects can act within a cultural context, both in original use and modern understanding.

Engaging with objects as material artifacts and extensions of histories is a productive way to bring the past into the present, and understand how culture has changed over time. Working together, oral history, written history, and historical objects can help triangulate a more complete image of bygone times:

Memory, history, and relics offer routes to the past best traversed in combination. Each route requires the others for the journey to be significant and credible. Relics trigger recollection, which history affirms and extends backward in time. History in isolation is barren and lifeless; relics mean only what history and memory convey. Indeed, many artifacts originated as memorial or historical witnesses. Significant apprehension of the past demands engagement with previous experience, one's own and others', along all three routes. (Lowenthal, 1985, p. 249)

Lowenthal's deliberate use of the word "relics" shows the elevation in status of a historical object from a simple item to something approaching sacred. Per his definition, heirlooms also fit the description of a "relic", in that they call specific memories to mind.

Memory relies on personal experience. Although insights, values, and viewpoints may change over time, approaching art objects through ancestors' accounts can help deepen a student's understanding of historical settings and contexts, expanding their appreciation of art as a result of a particular time and place (Lawton & La Porte, 2010). As a result, artifacts are particularly useful in art education. They can be used to create lessons that connect strongly to students' experience outside the classroom, in order to elucidate complex concepts:

Artifacts represent especially direct entryways into cultural inquiry and criticism for they are often ordinary, familiar, multiple, and integrated into everyday life. . . They mediate culture, shaping the way people think, and pass on ideas and values to each other and to the next generation. (Marshall, 2002, p. 282)

Not only are students naturally accustomed to artifacts (even if they do not recognize them as such), but artifacts are accessible reflections of social values and cultural traditions.

In addition, lessons centered on objects can show that artifacts are not only made in the art classroom, but exist outside of it in a variety of other familiar settings. Through the study of objects, it is possible for students to understand that artifacts are deliberately created, that they communicate ideas, and carry stylistic intention (Marshall, 2002). Art, artifact, and object are not discrete categories, and provide an intersection between history and modern culture.

## **Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This research examined functions of heirloom jewelry in family history and relationships through the framework of Actor-Network-Theory (ANT). ANT proposes the concept that objects not only exist within networks, but also function as actors and actants that perpetuate networks. ANT also proposes that objects can operate in these capacities alongside humans, in an equal (rather than derivative) sense.

ANT is a pliable theory, applicable to many different situations because of its intentional ambiguity. However, despite “theory” being a defining aspect of its name, Bruno Latour, a main proponent of ANT, demurred to calling a theory in strict terms (Latour, 2007). Openly interpreted, “ANT is not applied like a theoretical technology, but is more like a sensibility, a way to sense and draw nearer to a phenomenon” (Fenwick, Edwards, and Sawchuck, 2011, p. 95). It does not seek to define, but to interpret. As such, ANT will provide an effective frame for describing the social and cultural elements that surround heirloom jewelry.

Heirloom jewelry is a part of a variety of networks. In ANT literature, the term “network” is broadly interpreted, but in the current research will apply specifically to historical narrative’s interplay with family relationships. Within networks, actors and actants (both human and non-human) work together in varying capacities. ANT emphasizes relativity, making the connections between humans, their memories, objects, and places more relatable by suggesting that each of these potential pieces of a network can possess its own agency. These pieces of networks are termed “entities.” An entity is an assemblage of any arrangement of material beings and immaterial objects or ideas (Fenwick et al., 2011). Various entities’ push and pull with each other constructs a network, and the continuing interplay between entities sustains the network.

Beginning with the linked terms symmetry and tension, this chapter will describe key terms through which the following research will be framed. A description of translation will follow, and lead into a discussion of mediators and moderators in social interactions. The chapter will conclude with a brief overview of applications of ANT in educational settings.

### **3.2 Symmetry and Tension**

ANT supports the importance of human and non-human actors alike in creating networks. By “decentring human intention and agency as the engine of society and history,” (Fenwick et al., 2011, p.96), ANT seeks to explain the relationships between objects and humans within a network.

ANT does not exclude the possibility that inanimate objects can play an active part in the formation, perpetuation, and even disintegration of networks (Fenwick et al., 2011). Connected entities within these networks exercise force on each other through their linkages. This abstract tie between human and non-human entities is called “symmetry” in ANT literature, because ANT proposes that this tie can be formed equally by both sentient and insentient entities.

Although objects can act within a specific context, they can also be defined through their associations. That is, objects do not have their own willpower or volition, but are described by what Latour (2007) calls “tensions”: ties of varying strength between entities within a network. Within a large network, such as a family or culture, these tensions could be between family members, community members, jewelry, other objects, stories and family narratives, and specific places or associated memories.

Therefore, heirloom jewelry can be understood as an actor as it exercises power on family relationships. That is, jewelry can exert force symmetrical to human interaction: giving a piece of heirloom jewelry to a grandchild is a human interaction, but a piece of jewelry reminding the grandchild of his/her grandmother is a symmetrical reaction provoked by an inanimate object. In this scenario, jewelry acts as a reflexive connection within a network. It helps form a family network, and also perpetuates a network that may (in part or in whole) disintegrate after the death of a family member.

### **3.3 Translation**

Symmetry and tension can also effect a change in state of entities operating within a network. This change in state is termed “translation” in ANT. Translation describes “what happens when entities come together and connect, changing one another in the process of forming links” (Fenwick et al., 2011). Specifically, these entities interacting with one another are called actors and actants. While the operational entity is an ‘actor’, the affected entity is an ‘actant’ (Fenwick et al., 2011). These two roles are fluid, depending upon the points at which they meet and the connections they form.

Translation is a by-product of individual entities coming together and exerting pressure on each other, resulting in a change of activity level – or, a change in state in the social realm from actor to actant. An actant, as a contributing part of a network, “behaves with what appears to be particular intentions, morals, even consciousness and subjectivity . . . . When translation has succeeded, the entity that is being worked up [i.e., the actant] is mobilized to assume a particular



role and perform knowledge in a particular way” (Fenwick et al., 2011, p. 98). Thus, if a jewelry piece translates into an actant, it can function in capacities that are often perceived as being exclusive to humans.

Jewelry’s performance of knowledge is particularly evident with regards to identity expression. This expression can be human-determined, but is performed in tandem by the wearer and the jewelry. That is, although jewelry can represent internally important aspects of identity to the wearer, it also outwardly displays other aspects. These can potentially be the same, but may not be. For instance: if woman were to wear a diamond solitaire ring on her left ring finger, North American social customs would allow other people to understand it as an engagement ring. In this way, jewelry is telling a nonverbal story, or ‘performing knowledge,’ by signifying that the woman is engaged. Although other people might not understand the full significance of the ring (e.g., how long she and her partner have been together, when they became engaged), it gives outward voice to identity while carrying internal significance. It is enacting an established custom. Conversely, the ring could be something she purchased for herself and she is simply wearing it her left-hand ring finger until she can have it re-sized. This would carry entirely different significance: the internal importance would be different from the visual expression.

In this example the jewelry object translates into an actant when it is placed in a specific location on the body. Jewelry can independently voice information, customs, and interests, but these are situationally dependent. Additionally, this example is also reflective of the material and contextual interplay evident in heirloom jewelry: it is possible to, for instance, inherit a ring that originated as a wedding ring, but not wear it as one; the wearer would know the context, but it would not necessarily be enacted by the piece itself. The translation would be contextually dependent. In sum, jewelry’s material/artefactual aspects can enact certain traditions, but with an accompanying history, the becomes an heirloom that can successfully mediate and moderate relationship networks.

### **3.4 Mediators and Moderators**

ANT philosophers use the comically generic term “social stuff” (see Latour 2007, p. 43), to refer to the range of immaterial entities that make up relationships within networks. This ‘social stuff’ also interacts with objects (among other entities) in a symmetrical capacity, forming the tensions that allow for the translation of objects from actors to actants. Actors and actants, as

entities within networks, can be parsed into two even more nuanced roles: mediators and moderators.

The concepts of mediation and moderation are thoroughly described in psychological and sociological literatures, and are also used in ANT literature. These terms allow for a more practical understanding of jewelry's social influence, outside of a purely philosophical sense. Mediators "explain how external physical events take on internal psychological significance" (Baron & Kenny, 1986, p. 1174). Moderators, in contrast, "specify when certain effects will hold" and impact the "strength of a relationship between two other variables" (Baron & Kenny, 1986, p.1176). Objects perform various functions as both mediators and moderators.

Verbeek (2008) describes mediation as the way in which artifacts change human awareness and activity. Two of Verbeek's examples of common mediators include eyeglasses, which improve vision without active sensory input; and x-ray images, which reveal internal bodily structures in a way that is impossible to see with ordinary human abilities (described in Illies and Meijers, 2009). By improving vision (i.e., improving an existing ability), eyeglasses allow people to read more clearly up close, limiting headaches due to eyestrain. They also help people see better at a distance, with the indirect result of improved automobile safety. Without glasses, reading for long periods may result in painful headaches, or it may be impossible to see well enough to drive safely. Therefore, as a result of wearing glasses, peoples' activities change: they potentially read and drive more. In a different vein, x-ray images can be tremendously helpful to medical professionals in diagnosing various ailments (i.e., improving vision beyond human ability). However, despite this benefit of the technology, the radiation needed for developing the images can cause cancer, and as a result x-rays are taken as sparingly as possible. The benefits of the technology change perception, but detriments of the technology determine its usage limitations. These two examples demonstrate the influence of objects on human perception regardless of their designers' or makers' objectives, and their resulting effect on human awareness and activities (Illies and Meijers, 2009).

Objects, as a part of daily life in myriad ways, also affect human relations as moderators. Moderation is based on objects' presence in (rather than mediation of) human interactions. There are two ways to describe objects in this regard: they can be viewed as instruments, which are passive and act only as continuations of human decisions and activities; or as agents, which are self-directed and animated (Illies & Meijers, 2009). An example of a moderating object that can

act as both an instrument and an agent is a car. Cars can be perceived as a straightforward extension of human decision (that is, as an instrument), but cars have the ability to self-animate, particularly with autonomous computer systems that regulate fuel consumption and with the ability for airbags to automatically inflate during a collision. Although these are capacities designed and included in cars by humans, they perform without continuous human input, allowing the car its own agency. In this example, a car can be either an instrument or an agent depending upon the context.

However, both kinds of moderators can establish and impact the tensions that hold together networks, and entities can act as agents or instruments depending upon the setting. As previously described, translation changes entities' connections, resulting in the change in a structure of a network. These entities' interactions – through mediation or moderation – ultimately determines the strength or weakness of a network.

### **3.5 Actor-Network-Theory and Education**

ANT's fluidity allows it to be applicable to a variety of environments. Specifically, ANT is useful in educational environments: "ANT offers a language and conceptual resources with which to understand difficult ambivalences, messy objects, and apparent contradictions that are embedded in so many educational issues" (Fenwick et al., 2011, p. 95). Furthermore, the theory is useful in education because it acknowledges the effects and influences of objects, people, and places that together form and perpetuate educational networks (Harman, 2007; Sørensen, 2009). Instead of focusing only on human actions or interactions, it allows consideration of all potential entities involved in a network. Therefore, diverse entities including classroom technologies, home environment, culture, and academic standards can also be considered active components of educational networks (Castro, 2012; Fenwick et al., 2011; Knochel, 2011).

Heirloom jewelry fits Fenwick et al.'s (2011) definition of a "messy object" because of the manifold memories and stories associated with a piece. It can exist simply as an inanimate object, but when activated as part of a network, it calls many other aspects of daily life, including family, culture, and identity into view. Because of this, it possesses great potential to be used to bridge the gap between familiar objects in daily life and educational objects in other contexts (such as textbooks or museums). By linking the well-known to the unknown, objects can serve as a connecting point between informal and formal educational settings (Marshall, 2002). Furthermore, because heirloom jewelry can be readily understood as both an art object and potentially a

handmade artifact, it is particularly well-suited to support object-based teaching within arts education.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

Jewelry can create and sustain networks, serving as a cultural medium that is physically durable enough to potentially outlive its original owner. Jewelry's connection to history is a result of this link to humanity, whether in manufacture, purchase, gift, or reception. Although heirloom jewelry can independently divulge material clues about its origin through its physical characteristics (acting as an agent), it begins its existence as an instrument: as a passive extension of human resolution. Latour (2007) states, "Objects, by the very nature of their connections with humans, quickly shift from being mediators to being intermediaries, counting for one or nothing, no matter how internally complicated they might be" (p.79). Objects are not always viewed as contributing members of networks, but their inherent intricacies and their effects on human relationships require deeper investigation.

Heirloom jewelry pieces, like other objects, act and exert influence within a network – in the case of the present research, the specific networks of culture and family tradition. The following chapters will show that even jewelry that is less externally or aesthetically complicated can bring myriad issues and concerns to light, and act within a wide network of associations. Furthermore, jewelry's ability to act as a proxy by representing a family member that has passed away opens the door to discuss topics far beyond standard art-based interpretation of aesthetics and materials. Intense personal connections allow the potential for heirloom jewelry to be used as powerful educational tools.

Although framed through ANT, this research followed a case study methodology (described in detail in the following chapter). Case study methodologies and ANT work well together for several reasons. First, both ANT and case study methodologies can possess exploratory aims, seeking to broaden understanding rather than to specifically answer research questions regarding a phenomenon (Latour, 2007; Yin, 2014). Also, similar to ANT's attempt to align contributions from diverse entities (i.e., human and non-human) within a network, case studies accommodate multiple data sources and types within the same study (e.g., artefactual, archival, or verbal; Yin, 2014). Furthermore, by analyzing specific cases, ANT-based concepts can be identified and applied to daily life experiences, affording a more concrete understanding of

events and related concepts. In this research, ANT and a case study methodology will work together to enable a more refined understanding of heirloom jewelry's agency in family networks.

## **Chapter 4: Methodology**

### **4.1 Case Study Methodology**

This research examined how heirloom jewelry functions within family history. By tracing specific objects' associations, the research aimed to expand the understanding of the social and cultural influence of objects. Due to the exploratory, rather than explanatory, nature of this research the analysis and presentation of findings followed a case study methodology.

In general, case studies may be used successfully to give a comprehensive account of a social event “within its real-world context” (Yin, 2014, p.16). In addition, case studies can include an array of different data types, including oral history and archival documentation. A case study methodology is particularly useful when studying contemporary events, or events in the recent past (Yin, 2014). Although heirloom jewelry is frequently an artifact of the distant past, its current existence and continuing agency in family history ground it in the present.

Case studies are used in a variety of fields, including sociology, education, and anthropology. They have been used to recommend educational policy and to build understanding from narrative inquiries, both of which are aims linked to the current study. Additionally, using a case study methodology does not necessitate control of the events being studied, which is a particularly important consideration for the current research.

Many recent studies have employed a case study methodology to benefit art education curricula, examining individuals' experiences with the intent to improve the discipline and broaden its potential applications. For instance, Bertling (2015) successfully used an art-based curriculum to encourage the study of environmental ecology in a middle school classroom, collecting data through drawings, surveys, journals, and interviews in order to assess outcomes, which included increased environmental awareness. Similarly, Guyotte and colleagues (2015) researched the outcomes of collaboration between art education students and STEM-based peers, focusing on the utility of practical design applications to encourage a united STEAM curriculum that could benefit artists and engineers/scientists alike. In both of these studies, art education formed the basis for an interdisciplinary curricular exchange, with beneficial outcomes supporting recommendations for further use.

Although case studies can be critiqued for drawing large generalizations from small data sets, the current research acknowledges this potential limitation. This research does not seek to generalize across populations, but will instead highlight commonalities between participants'

experiences. Each case's individuality will be respected in accordance with the study's aims, but the commonalities arising between cases will demonstrate that although family history is highly personal, many individual experiences are shared across families.

#### **4.2 Definition and Selection of Cases**

The current research study is a multiple case study, examining three heirloom rings. Each participants' piece of jewelry and its accompanying history defines a single case. I recruited three participants from an extended network of my acquaintances, each of whom owns an heirloom ring. Because heirloom jewelry can be a very personal item and I was a novice interviewer during this process, I found it beneficial to have an existing friendly (but not close) relationship with participants, rather than recruiting strangers – who would be potentially be less invested in the research topic. Moreover, the familiarity between us enabled candid conversation while covering topics that could be fraught with family drama.

I selected participants based on two factors: their participatory interest, and their possession of an heirloom ring. Coincidentally, and quite fortuitously, over the course of the interviews I discovered that the three participants had more in common than I had anticipated. The three participants were all female, and had received rings originally owned by their grandmother (in two cases) and grandmother-in-law (in one case). The participants were between the ages of 30 and 40, and each had received their ring within the past two years at time of interview. The similarities between these cases, most notably in stage of life and relatively recent reception of the ring, suggest many parallels, although the stories themselves are highly individual. These similarities and differences will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

The relationship between material and contextual information arose as a challenging aspect of interviews. All heirloom jewelry has the potential to evoke family history, but some jewelry pieces provide fewer inherent material clues than others. That is, sometimes vintage or antique jewelry can be dated through hallmarks and makers' marks, or through identification of materials indicative of a certain era (e.g., natural river pearls, gutta-percha, bakelite<sup>1</sup>). Furthermore, stylistic

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<sup>1</sup> Natural river pearls are generally irregular in shape, and are representative of a time before pearls were widely cultured (and thus, more uniformly shaped). These pearls feature prominently in many Art Nouveau pendants. Gutta-percha, a natural latex, was used in the Victorian era to manufacture mourning jewelry, as the material was dark in color and could be easily molded into a variety of shapes. Bakelite, an early plastic, was produced as a gemstone substitute in the first half of the 1900's.

considerations can also be investigated – perhaps a piece possesses the milgrain detailing and elaborate engraving indicative of Art Nouveau, or perhaps it includes the gaudy gold-plating and oversize imitation gemstones of the 1940’s-50’s. However, in all three cases the rings were relatively plain, mass-produced pieces, and clues such as these were largely nonexistent.

Although the three rings presented here possess a minimum of material clues, the contextual information shared by willing participants illustrates an intangible – and incredibly important – feature of family history. Sharing stories and telling about loved ones can be fun, but is essential for keeping their memory alive after their death. The participants’ genuine interest in keeping their ancestors’ memory alive was overwhelming, and testifies to their deep love of family.

### **4.3 Data Collection**

This study was approved by the Concordia University Ethics Committee (certification of ethical acceptability is presented in Appendix A). I obtained written informed consent prior to beginning interviews. Each participant took part in two individual interviews, approximately 45 minutes each. I interviewed two participants in person: one participant did not have the ring with her, but provided detailed pictures at the time, and showed the ring to me at a later date. I interviewed the third participant via video chat due to logistical challenges, and she provided me with a detailed visual description and pictures of the ring. Pseudonyms are used to provide confidentiality for all three participants.

In all cases, I transcribed the first interview before the second occurred, allowing for clarification on specifics as needed. After examining the transcript, I created individualized questions to clarify topics or address missing points. In all of the interviews, I sought to open topics for discussion, but never to insert my own views.

In each case, I took pictures or requested that they send pictures of the ring to me for future reference. Because each ring is distinctive enough to be potentially identifiable, photographs will not be presented in this thesis in order to protect participants’ confidentiality. Instead, each case description includes an overview of notable characteristics of the rings, and renderings are presented in Appendix B.

### **4.4 Data Analysis and Synthesis**

Following the interviews, I “re-storied” (Creswell, 2007) each two-interview set by topic and then chronology. This allowed for the consolidation of linked topics from the separate



interviews but the retaining of all data, and attentiveness to the mood of the conversation. Furthermore, I carefully maintained participants' viewpoints and demonstration of issues. The merging of information from both interviews highlighted new themes in the data through the expansion and clarification of narratives.

To code the data, I imported the transcriptions into the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) program MAXQDA (version 12.1.0; Verbi GmbH, Berlin). I chose MAXQDA specifically because of its utility in code overlays and term searchability, along with its approachable interface. Although I coded transcriptions manually through the software, having the flexibility to list and re-organize codes at the click of a button was highly useful and expeditious.

To analyze the data, I began with codes suggested by the goals of the research (e.g., biographical and material information, cultural background), followed by emergent codes (including influence, ownership, connections, and continuance of family tradition). I examined the codes' similarities and differences across the three cases in order to synthesize findings. Findings are presented in Chapter 5.

#### **4.5 Ethical Considerations, Limitations, and Delimitations**

Through the three presented cases, this study analyzed jewelry's role as a mediator and moderator of family history and personal identity. The findings represent a viewpoint of North American/European descent, both in my participants' perspective and in my own. However, this does not preclude the possibility that heirloom jewelry can function in a similar way in other locations and cultures, and future research would benefit from a broader scope. The current research draws upon my professional and academic experience in order to interpret the objects and draw conclusions from the participants' narratives.

Each participant was invited to share other relevant artifacts related to her ring, including photographs, obituaries, or other items that they felt were related. However, although all three participants mentioned relevant artifacts during interviews, only one supplied additional material. As case studies are a methodology noted for their ability to include a variety of supplemental – and alluringly, non-textual – materials (Yin, 2014), it is a limitation of this study that a minimum of other material was available for study.

The scope of this study was small, but this limitation can also be viewed as a strength of the study. I chose rings as a specific heirloom jewelry format because they limited the field of

study; and by interviewing three women of a similar age and stage of life, the findings are even more concentrated. Although the findings show many shared experiences between my participants' families, this does not exclude other jewelry of any type or format from playing an active role in other families' history. Because this study does not seek to generalize the experience of owning an heirloom ring, these close similarities, along with the participants' common description of experiences, may be considered a strength of the current study.

The following cases are unique, but in concert they display how an object has the ability to preserve history, and show heirlooms' importance in establishing and re-telling family history. These roles are linked to the concepts of mediation and moderation, where objects can facilitate interactions, passively extend activities, or self-direct, while possessing agency that is equal to human intention. Heirloom jewelry has the potential to act in each of these capacities, not only as instruments of human sentiment, but also by facilitating storytelling and by autonomously representing ancestors' interests and values.

## Chapter 5: Findings

### 5.1 Introduction

In many respects, the stories of these objects and their owners are inseparable from, as more than one participant described it, “family dirt.” Each participant’s interviews started with similar questions focusing on family history, tradition, and identity, then diverged into different topics, as the participant wished to share. However, although each story is individual, they contain many commonalities.

All names have been changed according to participants’ wishes for confidentiality. Renderings of each of the three rings are shown in Appendix B, as showing photographs of each ring would enable easy identification and potentially breach confidentiality. Line renderings, however, leave ample room for imagination.

Each section is a thorough consolidation of topics covered during each participant’s two interviews. I carefully “restored” (Creswell, 2007) the interview transcriptions, keeping their information and mood intact, but allowing a more cohesive narrative to emerge through careful topical and chronological arrangement. Although some aspects of the interviews appear to be unconnected to their rings, or to objects’ agency in family history, the analysis will show that it is important to understand the connection the participants had with their ancestors, and how family heritage plays into the significance of each of these jewelry pieces.

When asked about details in stories, interviewees respond in one of three ways: through examples, narratives, or stories (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Examples demonstrate or illustrate; narratives are re-tellings of events, based mostly – if not entirely – on facts; and stories are versions of narratives that are familiar and re-told in a similar format to make a specific point, rather than convey factual information (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Each of the three participants exhibits these varied forms of response, to different ends.

The separation between material and contextual information in these stories is clear, with available material and supplemental archival information quite minimal. In order to give a more complete picture of each case, I have endeavored to illustrate how the participant, their object, and their family history relate.

### 5.2 Cases

**Case 1: Sara.** Sara’s ring was left to her by her maternal grandmother, following her death in early 2015. The ring is yellow gold, with a thin, curvilinear band and a centrally-set pear-shaped

light blue stone, and a small white stone set to the side. The ring did not display any clues or specific stylistic aspects to allow it to be dateable.

Sara said that her grandmother had purchased rings for each of her granddaughters, to be given to them upon her passing. Sara does not know if her grandmother, whom they called “Mamie,” had ever worn these rings, but said that “they were specifically to be handed down as a memorial to represent her.”

Sara described an evening after Mamie’s death, when her family met to look through photo albums, reliving happy memories with Mamie. After a time, her mom brought out the five rings her grandmother had purchased, and asked Sara to choose first, as the oldest female cousin. She described the setting and her emotions while choosing the ring:

So I went, I looked at all five, and they were different stones, different colors, and the one that I chose, I felt it – it was actually the largest of all the rings – some of them were small and just petite . . . I felt there was a lot of pressure for me to go first, to choose the ring. And – at the same time I felt a little bit of entitlement, like, ‘Oh, I’m the oldest, I get to go first, I get the best ring,’ but it’s interesting because I really do feel like when we, when I went up to choose the ring, I had said to my mom and my aunt, I said, ‘I can’t go first, I don’t know what ring to choose, can we all just talk about it?’ And they said, ‘No. You go first.’ They were really stern about it, because they didn’t want any fighting! And I said, ‘I don’t know! I don’t know.’ And I just really wanted to make sure everyone got the ring that they wanted.

Ultimately, Sara said that she feels each of her cousins was happy with their choices, and speculated that perhaps Mamie had chosen rings to suit their personalities – even if she had not left specific rings to each cousin.

Sara said that she ultimately chose the ring she did because she “felt it kind of represented my grandmother the best, as well as me.” She felt drawn to the blue stone, joking that it might be because of Mamie’s aura, or maybe the way she remembers her eye color. But she said that she was attracted to the ring because it seemed to have a “big personality,” in a way that both she and Mamie share.

While thinking further about her associations with this blue color and why she felt it represented her grandmother, Sara mentioned that Mamie’s birthday was in March. The blue-green stone in the ring either is, or is meant to replicate, an aquamarine: March’s birthstone. Sara did not

know of this association, but said that this blue tone was a color that Mamie would often wear, and it brought out her eye color. Sara said:

One of the reasons that I chose that ring over the others was that it reminded me of her . . . something about, I don't know, the blue, and that sort of watery blue, that pale, almost like a really nice sky . . . Like a really nice day where the sky is just really blue and you love everything, you know?

Through this statement, Sara tied evocative, happy images in with the memory of her grandmother.

Although she did not know if Mamie wore the ring, Sara said that it looks like something she would have worn, as it was very much her style. Recognizing that the ring is not of great material value, she mentioned that generally, when looking for gifts for the family Mamie was less concerned with price and more interested in being generous with her family, or simply liking an item. Preference and generosity took precedence over value for Mamie.

Sara said that perhaps because Mamie did not leave rings of high monetary value, and also because she did not wear the rings given to the cousins (and they therefore did not have that type of sentimental attachment), there was no ill-will or jealousy in the family regarding this. Mamie also left watches for each of Sara's male cousins – making sure that every grandchild received a memento. Sara described Mamie as always being a very giving person:

My mom would get upset with her when she was doing gift-buying, because she didn't have enough money to do it, but she would just – “It doesn't matter! I don't care! This is more important to me than having this money.” Like, I don't care if I can eat next week, I just want to make sure that my family knows that there's this object that connects my love, or that connects us, together. I think that was the importance to her.

Sara continued, describing how she holds this same ethic:

I do that. When I give a gift, I want it to be specific and intentional. I want there to be purpose behind it. It's not just about going out and spending a lot of money, or getting the most lavish gift – it's about what does that mean to that person, and how does it connect to me, the person who gave it.

In this way, Sara sees her own care and attention to gift-giving as a result of Mamie's big-hearted example.

The similarities between Sara and Mamie extend beyond their shared generosity. Sara fondly described her grandmother as a “kind of crazy-quirky kind of woman who was always

laughing, and she was just kind of bonkers.” Sara mentioned many times that Mamie loved to laugh, and the two of them were on the same wavelength:

My mother always said that we were kindred spirits, because I’m a little bit quirky and wild sometimes myself. I like to laugh also . . . Sometimes, I didn’t even understand what we [Mamie and I] were laughing at, and it didn’t matter. It was just the act of laughing. That was the point. It was just having fun.

Sara, of course, smiled broadly and laughed continually while telling me this.

Sara explained another aspect of her and Mamie’s strong relationship:

I felt like . . . somebody got me. Like maybe we’re a little bit nuts or maybe we’re too “out-there” or we say the wrong thing, or whatever it is! But I never felt judged by her. I felt like she really liked me, like she really embraced who I was, who I am, and I felt really comfortable and happy with her . . . I felt like we were on the same team, which was really – it’s a really nice feeling to have somebody on your side.

Through this statement, Sara described her and Mamie’s relationship as a friendship between equals, rather than at ends of a family hierarchy based on seniority.

Another aspect of herself and her heritage that Sara described was her tie to Montreal. Mamie lived in the city for a time, and spoke French as her first language. Sara, an Anglophone, said that her interest in this heritage was a large motivator for her to move to and reside long-term in Montreal, living in the same city as Mamie did. This is an aspect of Sara’s heritage that she seeks to establish as part of her own identity.

Sara explained that she does not wear the ring often, although she enjoys the ring aesthetically. She said that part of her reasoning for not wearing it often is that she quickly made a long-distance move and only brought minimal possessions with her (which did not include her ring), but also because she fidgets with rings. But, she said, especially with the holidays approaching at the time of her interview, “I think that if I had the ring, I would definitely wear it just because I am thinking about her, and just seeing it or having it on would make me feel closer.” Her ring helps close a distance.

Sara summed up her thoughts about her ring:

It’s an object that allows me to connect to her, and to her memory . . . I think, whether I wear it or not, I know it’s there, I see it, and that’s – it’s a trigger for remembering those good things, the good experiences, the good qualities that she had. Yeah, I think, I’ll never

look at that ring and not think of her. It just won't happen. It's always going to be about her when I see that ring. So whether I am wearing the ring and someone asks me about it, or if it's sitting in my bathroom in my jewelry box . . . it'll be about her.

Sara's close relationship with her grandmother was evident in the way she shared her memories. For her, owning this ring serves as an important part of remembering her beloved grandmother.

**Case 2: Jane.** Jane shared a ring that was handed down to her from her paternal grandmother, after she passed away in 2013. The gold ring was originally a gift for her grandmother. It is a 'mother's ring' format, containing seven small prong-set birthstones in different colors. The stones are set in a line across the top of the band, flanked by small pierced circles.

Jane was unsure of which stone pertained to whose birthday, and although she could attribute six of them to her aunts and uncles, she was unsure of who the seventh stone represented. She mentioned the difference between having her grandfather's birthstone as the seventh, or if it was her grandmother's: "It says two very different things, when you have a ring that includes your husband, or if it's a ring that includes you and your kids." The emphasis in family structure would be quite different.

Jane's grandmother and grandfather built and worked a farm their whole lives, and in their declining later years they had to sell it in order to afford a nursing home:

They had this farm for sixty-some years, and the amount of stuff . . . and barns, and pig barns, and woodsheds, and tool sheds, everything was full of junk. I mean, lots of useable stuff, but it was just incredible, the amount of stuff they had. My grandma [downsized to] a wardrobe at the nursing home, and a little drawer . . . That was it, all of her belongings . . . She didn't have much left when she died. So she intentionally left this for me. It was in a bag, in a plastic bag, and it had my name on it.

Jane mentioned that because her grandmother did not own many possessions when she died, this ring must have been very special to her.

Jane's father gave her the ring, in the plastic bag, after the funeral. She was not sure of whether her grandmother wrote it in her will, or made a request of Jane's father to give it to her later. Jane commented that she believes she might have been one of the few grandchildren to have been left anything, and that leaving a gift in this way was "also probably tradition. To leave your objects of value to people after you die . . . my grandmother was very traditional, so this was

probably specific to that, and how there's a certain order of how things go." This custom of leaving items, instead of giving them directly, seems to be part of a larger cultural custom.

Jane described her grandmother as fulfilling a traditional maternal role in the family, selflessly taking care of her husband, children, and grandchildren over the years. Jane had a close relationship with her, and described the powerful experience of being with her when she died:

It's funny, I sat with her for so long after she died, and held onto her hand, and I could feel her still there. Like, I could actually feel her energy in my hand. And then, I don't know, I was there for, I don't know how long, a couple more hours like that, and it was weird – and suddenly, it was like she was gone. It was like – I couldn't – It wasn't like I saw something . . . something about the light shifted in the room, or like, the way the room felt, changed, and I was just like, "Ok. She's gone." And . . . I just felt so privileged to have gone through that experience with her. And I felt just so connected with her and just so, so grateful that I knew her.

Understandably, this intense experience remains very significant for Jane. It ties closely to her spiritual practice, and plays a role in the way she thinks about her ring, contributing to the times she chooses to wear it.

Jane said that she wore the ring quite frequently after her grandmother passed away, but now she only wears it on special occasions. She calls it an "object of power," which she described as any object that is imbued with significance. Jane elaborated on the term, describing how objects of power often have personal significance, and that this significance has the potential to be positive or negative:

I feel like every matter holds energy, you know, just like humans are full of energy, and every living thing is full of energy. And I feel the same way about spaces and objects. They sort of have this memory to them. And that can be different for different people, depending on like, how they relate to the space or how they've experienced the space or the object.

Jane believes in the innate memory of objects, although she conceded that not everyone experiences the same object in the same way.

This ring has a multifaceted significance for Jane. She explained that although she had a strong positive relationship with her grandmother, it was also more complex than that. Jane explained that she was not the first grandchild in the family, but "I was sort of, my grandmother's favorite, a bit, because I was the first grandchild who was born in wedlock." Jane explained that



another reason the reason the ring is so powerful for her is because of this conflict in family dynamics. It is a potent reminder of the love her grandmother had for her, but also of some less pleasant memories.

When asked how her paternal grandmother this differed from her maternal side of the family, Jane explained that the maternal side of her family was small, and did not leave a legacy with her family or within a broader community when they passed away. Her mother owns very few remaining possessions of theirs. She noted:

It's interesting, how you know, almost a whole lineage of people almost cease to exist. There's like nothing – there's no – My mom doesn't go and visit their graves, I'm sure nobody else does . . . they end up being these people that no one remembers.

Although she later backtracked a bit on this statement, through it Jane differentiated between her paternal grandparents, whose memory lives on through their strong community ties and the objects they left behind, and her maternal grandparents, with whom she feels much less connected, for a variety of reasons (including family dynamics). In contrast, Jane described that although her ring is not the only tie she has to her paternal grandmother, its presence helps revisit memories of her grandmother.

Jane said that she tries not to be sentimental about possessions, and that she enjoys the physical and mental freedom from not keeping extra items in her home. Her family influences regarding material possessions have led her to keep fewer things, from a practical and emotional standpoint. She said:

When I get home, I don't want to be stimulated by a zillion objects, you know? Visually, or just like that I'm sharing the space with them. And also, I don't know – I love this idea of, if I ever had to, or ever was inspired to, that I could just leave everything. That there would be a few things that I would take with me, like my grandmother's ring, like the little tin box – a few things that are special. But I like this idea, that psychologically, I could leave everything else behind, and not even think about it.

Jane described that part of this feeling comes from the life she leads in a big city, which is full of stimulation but small on space. She differentiated between her grandparents' rural lifestyle, which was largely independent yet closely tied to their community, and her own, where she does not know her neighbors and lives conveniently close to most amenities.

When asked to describe further about her relationship with her grandmother, Jane said:

She represents this part of myself that I don't always get to connect to. And it's a part of myself that, you know, is very much fundamental to who I am, and how I grew up . . . it's the part of me that's from another time.

Jane's grandmother taught her how to garden, and about many other aspects of life on a farm. Jane maintains a strong interest in farming, sustainability, and handmade goods, and works to make these practices a part of her personal and professional life.

In sum, Jane described her ring as "a connection to my grandma . . . it being one of the only physical things of her that I have left. A connection to her memory, and . . . [to] what I've learned from her." But Jane was quick to clarify that owning a few heirloom possessions was not the only reason she remembers her grandmother:

When I say like, there's nothing left of people, I don't actually think it's true. Because even if there aren't physical things left, so much of my being is influenced by her. So, I guess the ring is a reminder of that. And how much she inspired me, and how much I learned from her, and how much she nurtured me and cared about me.

Jane's ring exemplifies how objects can support an important memorial connection, extending a strong social bond. In this particular statement, Jane showed how identity can be shaped by family relationships, relating nurturing memories to her current views and beliefs.

**Case 3: Carmen.** Carmen spoke about a ring given to her by her husband's aunt Lillian for Christmas in 2014. The ring had originally belonged to her husband's paternal grandmother, whom they called "Gram". This piece was Gram's wedding ring, and is a classic style: a white gold band with five channel-set small diamonds across the top.

Carmen received the ring at a family Christmas party, where her husband's Aunt Lillian gave a present to her and each of her two younger sisters-in-law. Although she was excited and honored, Carmen said that she also felt guilty when she knew what the ring was, as her sisters-in-law received presents of lesser sentimental and material value from Lillian at the same time. Carmen explained:

Especially as an in-law, you never want to feel like you're trumping your sisters-in-law. There was a little bit of [guilt]. If I were to have any mixed feelings at all, it was really positive, it was just – I was a little overwhelmed with how to deal with those feelings . . . in an ideal world it would have been nice if all three of us had gotten one!

It is a credit to Carmen's love of her sisters-in-law that she cares about their feelings on the matter.

She said that for a while, she considered giving it to one of her unmarried sisters-in-law in the future, for use as a wedding band, but her husband cautioned against giving such a special gift that could not be made equal among both sisters. However, since that time, she has become more confident in her ownership of the heirloom piece. She further explained that she is sure other family heirlooms will come to her sisters-in-law through Lillian as time progresses, which helps alleviate her feelings about the situation.

Unsure of how the ring came to Lillian, Carmen guessed that it passed to Lillian when Gram died. She supposed that Gram would have likely worn the ring until the day she died. Carmen figured that after that it would have come into the possession of Lillian, Gram's only daughter.

Lillian told her that the ring should always be "on the hand of a Collins woman." Carmen explained:

I don't know if it's meant to be for me because my last name is now Collins, and that the girls, when they get married, they wouldn't have that name, but. . . when she [Lillian] gave it to me, I did feel like the cement, sort of [set].

In other words, Lillian appeared to be showing her approval and welcoming Carmen into the family through the gift of this ring.

When asked if the gift of this ring changed her perception of Lillian, Carmen said it did in several ways. Carmen said:

I was really taken aback when she gave it to me. And I was really excited, and I thought it was a really nice gesture . . . I had to take it as a really big sign that, you know, she likes me, when she gave me the ring."

She described how it can be difficult for older generations to recognize that their children and nieces/nephews are adults, and no longer children. She continued,

It made me feel like she took us kind of seriously, as adults. That we were ready for that kind of ring . . . I could see how, when we first got married, and maybe before we got married, how maybe she thought we weren't mature enough for it, or something like that. And also, I just felt touched. She didn't have to give it to me. I mean, she could've waited and given it to my son . . . She could've bypassed me completely.

Lillian seems to have made this gift with much intention, which Carmen recognizes.

Although the gift of a family heirloom can help strengthen family bonds, these objects can also be linked to unsavory family history. Carmen mentioned that she was unsure if it was a

regional/cultural or era-specific value, but that a hidden issue implicated by her ring is that Gram had a troubled marriage. Her husband was an alcoholic, but Gram stayed married to him until his death. Remaining grateful for the gift but also recognizing this unfortunate association, she remarked, “But now we’re supposed to pretend that this [ring] is a great symbol of their love. We’re supposed to brush under the table that technically this ring was tarnished from the start!” In other words, Carmen acknowledges the conflicting stories that accompany the ring: on one hand, that Gram and her husband were married for many decades, but on the other that it was not perhaps the happiest marriage.

Gram passed away several years before Carmen and her husband were married, so Carmen only met Gram a few times. Carmen described Gram, based on her husband’s descriptions, as “very sweet and gentle,” much like her father-in-law, but also “headstrong” like Lillian, with conservative Christian values. Gram passed away while Carmen and her now-husband were dating, so they had only met on a few occasions. Carmen mentioned that prior to their marriage, “unfortunately, all that I really knew of Gram is that she didn’t really approve of us going to Europe together [alone, before we were married].” However, Carmen says that Gram “was loved by all,” though she did not have the chance to get to know her.

Carmen said that she is generally not a very sentimental person, but also said:

I wish that the ring did have those sorts of powers, to make me feel a little more tied to her.

But [my husband] says so often, with different things, “I wish you could’ve known Gram,” or he’ll tell a story, and he’ll be like, “You would have really liked her.”

She said that she thinks of Gram most when she is driving around town and sees places Gram lived or organizations she was involved with, and that these place-based reminders encourage her to find ways to become more involved with organizations the Collins family has traditionally been a part of. She does not, however, feel that this ring directly impacts her feelings about being associated with these groups.

Carmen does not often wear the ring, as it fits best on the same finger as her own wedding and engagement set, but it does not fit snugly against the other rings because of their curvature. She mentioned that she did wear it recently to a Collins family reunion, and her husband noticed and appreciated that there was a “little bit of Gram who was present.” She felt it was important to wear that day, but it is not an everyday ring for her.

Reflecting further on Lillian's statement that the ring should "be on the hand of a Collins woman", Carmen has thought substantially her future plans for the piece:

It does postulate the whole question of, like, someone can give you this item, and it is this heirloom piece of jewelry, but do I have to follow the rules? Do I have to follow the rules of the piece? Does the piece get to control me?

She wondered, could she give it to her own daughter, or if her daughter gets married and changes her name, would she still be a "Collins woman"? Carmen explained:

If I hadn't just more recently found out that I'm having a boy, I don't know that I would have actually followed them, because maybe I couldn't. But – but now that I am, I feel sort of bound to follow it. It's not my place . . . to weigh in.

Although Lillian did not directly place a condition on the ring, tradition is a hefty consideration for Carmen.

Carmen stated simply, "I do think there's something cool about – that jewelry does live beyond your years." This allusion to the durability and longevity of jewelry aligns with another part of her family views. Although she mentioned that she comes from a large family and her husband is also part of a large blended family, she described her husband's paternal family as very small. This contributes to her powerful feeling that this ring serves as "a very strong connection to the Collins family."

### **5.3 Analysis**

These three cases present a great amount of similarity, although they are unique in their origins and telling. For comprehensive study, narratives and stories can be broken down into on four areas: events and topical markers, examples, concepts, and themes (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The following analysis will focus on themes and concepts that emerged during the coding process, which were often coupled with examples and events/topical markers.

The following sections will also discuss the themes that emerged as shared experiences between participants. Because the tangled associations of heirloom jewelry and their owners' memories present a variety of experience and beliefs, I was surprised when each of these interviews ended with the same answer to one open-ended question. Therefore, I will begin my analysis not at the beginning of the interviews, but at the end.

**Connection.** To conclude our second interview session, I asked Sara, Jane, and Carmen to describe, in one sentence, what purpose their ring serves for them. All three described their ring

as a “connection” to their forebears. Of course, the connections are different for each of them, but the independent use of this word underscores its importance.

For Sara, her ring connects her to Mamie by helping her remember happy times they spent together. For Jane, the ring connects her to her nurturing grandmother, her farming heritage, and a different way of life than she presently leads. Carmen’s ring connects her to a very important figure in her husband’s life, although she barely knew her. Each ring’s connection illustrates the complexity and diversity of family dynamics, and for each of these women, their rings link them to a history and part of their family that no longer exists.

In this way, heirloom jewelry serves as a type of physical memorial. Through their physical existence and enduring presence in everyday life, these rings help recall memories, as each participant mentioned in her interview. They provide a lasting communication between family members that exists even as time progresses. In a different way, jewelry’s connection to specific time periods or life events (e.g., wedding day, motherhood) can also extend beyond their original owner’s life, and relate information independent of the owner’s personal memories. In doing so, jewelry creates tangible, material connections between past and present.

However, there are also immaterial connections present. Memory – perhaps the most intangible of substances – is closely aligned with the importance ascribed to, and sentimentality associated with, heirlooms. For Sara and Jane, their direct memories of their grandmothers encompass a variety of situations, ranging from as simple as keeping certain sweets around the house to as powerful as witnessing the progression of their grandmothers’ final illnesses. For Carmen, who has fewer direct memories of her grandmother-in-law Gram, her knowledge of Gram’s interests and life are mostly based on re-tellings of other people’s memories – although no less valid, the connections are different, as they are shaped by intermediaries and are not directly based on her own observation.

In Carmen’s case, these intermediaries are humans – rather than the objects discussed so much in this analysis – and this relationship exemplifies how humans and objects can work together within a network. Carmen’s husband and Lillian (and likely other family members, as well) have influenced Carmen’s perception of Gram over time, sharing memories and gradually allowing Carmen a complete understanding of Gram’s interests, personality, and legacy. Lillian’s gift of, and Carmen’s receipt of, Gram’s ring was a symmetrical action between humans: it created a (positive) tension between the two of them, and strengthened a family network. Likewise, the

family's influence on Carmen's memorial perception in conjunction with the ring's presence in her life have worked together to form a tension (again, positive) between humans and non-humans, knitting a family together more tightly. These interactions have allowed the ring to translate from an everyday object to an heirloom, performing a newer and more powerful role as an actant, as it also implies the continuance of a tradition and who it might be given to next.

**Ownership: Past, Present, Future.** Sara, Jane, and Carmen are the sole, legal owners of their respective rings. As heirlooms, however, the accumulated history and memories surrounding each ring create a more complex notion of ownership than simply having an item in one's possession. Each case shows that ownership of these rings is part of a family hierarchy of seniority and relationships over time.

In Sara's case, Mamie originally owned her and her cousins' rings, but they were purchased for her granddaughters as a memorial to her memory. Her grandmother's past ownership was intentionally transient. As described previously, Sara felt nervous choosing a ring and wanted to make sure that each of her cousins was also happy with their selection. As the oldest cousin, she chose first, and was uncomfortable doing so. Over time, though, Sara has become comfortable with her choice, and feels like she is the rightful owner.

Jane, although she was explicitly left her ring by her grandmother, still feels conflicted about her role as owner of her ring. Her conflict stems in part from her grandmother's refusal to acknowledge an older cousin as a legitimate grandchild, by default making Jane her eldest grandchild. Jane's notion of ownership is directly tied to what she feels is a misinterpretation of her family hierarchy. She loved her grandmother deeply and had a close relationship with her, but Jane never felt comfortable being "the favorite." In this position, now owning one of the few possessions her grandmother left behind, she still feels conflicted, although she seems to have accepted it more over time.

Carmen, too, felt conflicted about owning her ring – although her stance has shifted over time. She described her initial reaction of feeling it would be more appropriate for one of her sisters-in-law to own, as the ring had belonged to their grandmother. Carmen noted, just like Sara and Jane, that she didn't want to create family conflict by owning an item so charged with family importance. Carmen did not want to create jealousy between her sisters-in-law by overstepping perceived boundaries, or invoke anger from her husband's aunt Lillian by giving it to another family member. Notably, Carmen was the only participant who mentioned that her present

ownership of the ring is transitory, and that she has future plans for the ring. Between her two interviews, she learned that she would be having a baby boy, and she has felt much more comfortable owning the ring since then. She was excited at the idea of potentially holding it for him to use, continuing a family tradition many years in the future.

**Tradition.** Each of the three cases presents a different view on family tradition. These traditions encompass the way items were given, how they fit within existing family customs, and how participants view themselves within a larger family group. Situated within these contexts, jewelry can be seen as extension of tradition.

**How Given.** The most general tradition present in these three cases is simply the leaving of objects to family members who would appreciate them. Jane mentioned the idea of a “postmortem gift”, which is a darkly humorous, but very honest, description of the phenomenon. In none of the cases did the grandmother present the ring to its current owner; it was left to them.

Jane said she knew her grandmother meant her to have her ring, although she did not know if her grandmother had requested it of her father, or if the ring had simply been labeled for her and found among her grandmother’s possessions after she passed. Sara’s ring, although not specifically for her, was one of a set that was left for a group that included her. Both of these rings are intentional heirlooms, determined to become so by their original owners. The intentionality behind these rings is straightforward, almost as if their grandmothers had given these rings to them and said, “Remember me with this.” This is a straightforward tradition, familiar throughout many families, and certainly is not exclusive to jewelry.

In contrast, Carmen’s became an heirloom through an intermediary (Aunt Lillian). Although no less intentional, the meaning is different. Carmen mentioned that she did not know Gram well, but she did know that Gram was vocal about her disapproval that Carmen and her now-husband took a vacation together, by themselves, before they were married. Based on Gram’s conservative moral stance, it would not be a stretch of reasoning to conclude that it would have taken a bit of work for Carmen to win Gram over at a later time. However, Gram passed away before Carmen could build a relationship with her. Aunt Lillian became Gram’s proxy by passing on the ring in her stead.

**Family Custom.** Although the means through which objects become heirlooms can vary, the way in which a gift is given also ties to family custom. Carmen’s case, in particular, illustrates a challenging aspect of owning a family heirloom: the weight of tradition. Her ring was a kind



gesture, a welcome gift from her in-law – but it was also given in an unequal context (unlike Jane’s, but like Sara’s). Additionally, although not explicitly stated as such, it was given with a direction of who the ring should be passed to next. In other words, the ring came with strings attached. Carmen was conflicted: by accepting the ring, did she also agree to terms and conditions? Of course, there is no ‘correct’ answer to this question - although she stated that she likely would follow the custom.

***Continuation of Family: Situated Identity.*** Another commonality that Sara’s, Jane’s, and Carmen’s interviews shared was their description of their grandmother/-in-law’s interests and personality in relation to their own character traits. To have a better understanding of their relationship, I asked each participant to describe her grandmother/-in-law, but each participant independently inserted her own traits into the discussion. This tendency affirms a relativistic place in a family hierarchy, indicating that each participant carries on certain traits or interests learned or indirectly inherited from her ancestor.

Carmen did this least directly, beginning by saying that she didn’t know Gram that well, then describing that Gram had a very strong work ethic that involved much community engagement. Finally, she shared that she would like to continue some of Gram’s work in the community. Carmen shares a strong work ethic, which she hopes to apply in a very concrete way - by helping Gram’s legacy continue. She mentioned that although her ring is not what necessarily directly inspires this goal, it is part of a cluster of interrelated family interests and responsibilities that she feels strongly she should support.

In a more direct way, Jane also talked about her grandmother’s community ties, and said that she too would like to become a part of a community in a similar way to her grandmother. Jane also mentioned the loving, generous aspects of her grandmother she experienced through their close relationship, and mentioned that wearing her ring helps her connect to parts of herself that she does not usually present to others. Jane also mentioned that she tries very actively to be a part of smaller communities within a larger city, but that the inter-reliance in farming communities is quite different from communities in the city, which form based on mutual interest rather than physical proximity.

Sara, too, directly described the traits she and Mamie shared. From their eyes to their love of laughter, her descriptions illustrate kindred spirits. Sara also described how sharing stories about her grandmother helps her keep memories alive, and through shared experience with one cousin

in particular, she will continue her grandmother's legacy by learning French and visiting her ancestral homeland. From these three cases, it is apparent that describing oneself in terms of being similar an ancestor helps to carry on their memory.

#### **5.4 Theoretical Findings**

Beyond the similarities shown in the analysis above, the material and contextual aspects of the three cases in this research also support theoretical findings regarding heirloom jewelry and its place in family history. I have divided these theoretical findings into influence (symmetry, tension, and translation) and leverage (mediation and moderation). Influence will focus on a stricter ANT analytical framework, while leverage will encompass a broader understanding of the concepts. These findings support the concepts promoted by ANT, as jewelry is not only an object given and received, but an independent component of human interactions within a social network.

**Influence.** ANT's abstract concepts of symmetry, tension, and translation are readily observable in the participants' oral history. However, rather than operating independently, these concepts operate in conjunction as a more general form of influence. Together, these concepts help form an individual's outlook within complex family network. Although I have broken them down individually, none of these concepts operate autonomously.

**Symmetry.** Each case presents a related idea of symmetry. An object, in this case an heirloom ring, helps perpetuate a family network after the death of an ancestor, which would have otherwise been weakened to the point of disintegration. Of course, the relationship between two people changes following the death of one, but the surviving person still possesses a relationship with, and to, the deceased. Because of an heirloom's presence, the owners of these three rings are encouraged to recall their ancestor, and re-live memories and characteristics they themselves carry on. The connections between one human and an object, and the object and another human, is symmetrical – changing in state, but not in power.

Objects are heirlooms because value (sentimental and/or monetary) is assigned to them, as a result of their associations. First and foremost, heirlooms remind us of other important people in our lives. However, they also remind us of these important peoples' relationship to other objects, and between other objects potentially owned by the same important people.

Humans and non-humans interact in these oral histories, giving rise to a vivid landscape of people and their connection to their possessions. Understanding the importance of Jane's ring would be incomplete without knowing her grandmother once had many, many possessions in her

farmhouse; and the sale of her estate left a deep impression on Jane. Since then, Jane has pared her possessions down to only objects that she feels are essential (including this ring). Sara, too, mentioned other objects Mamie kept around the house, particularly quirky little animal figurines. These objects gave a more complete idea of Mamie's interests, and add details to Sara's memory. Relating other objects in a slightly different way, Carmen mentioned a second heirloom jewelry piece several times during her interviews, and sometimes explained the significance of Gram's ring in relative terms. The heirloom rings described in this research do not exist in a vacuum, but as part of networks that incorporate myriad other entities, both human and non-human.

***Tension.*** Tensions between these various entities tie together memories of — and opinions on — family history. In each case, the heirloom ring influences the participant's family history narrative, and their place in it. This tension holds pieces of a family network, and narrative, in place. However, this influential tension takes many forms, and is different for each individual.

For Sara, this tension ties her more closely to her grandmother Mamie, and has helped her move on after Mamie passed away. Although other aspects of her family history have been uneasy at times, this jewelry piece anchors her to happy memories. Similarly, Jane's inheritance of her grandmother's ring pulls her closer to the love and warmth she felt as a child, and the maternal lifestyle she associates with her grandmother. Carmen, as well, sees the inheritance of her ring as having solidified a bond, and plans to carry on the legacy of her husband's family within the community. In these ways, heirloom jewelry serves as a proverbial "tie that binds," stabilizing memories through its continued existence.

***Translation.*** In these three cases, jewelry changes in its state from an actor to an actant when it is given/received as an heirloom. Actants perform a specific purpose and share information in a distinct way (Fenwick et al., 2011). As opposed to an actor, which is an existing element in a network, an actant is a contributing element in a network.

When an object translates into an actant, it can function in ways that are perceived as unique to humans. Although heirloom jewelry does not go so far as to exhibit a conscience or willpower, it can act as a representative for a person that has passed away. In this sense, heirloom jewelry serves as an agent: instead of a verbal reminder of someone, it is a tactile and visual cue to recall specific memories of a person, associated places, and associated actions and related things. As described by each participant, their connection to their ancestors through the rings is a powerful element of their experience in owning an heirloom.

Without the rings' associated tensions, or the rings' symmetrical interactions, they would not be translated into an heirloom. Connection is the operative element that contributes to the translation of a simple object into an heirloom, and is the bedrock upon which the network is built.

**Leverage.** Entities, human and non-human, are variables within networks. Moderation and mediation are two ways in which the entities described by ANT can interact within networks, and between entities. Rather than influence, which is based in effect, mediators and moderators leverage actions and emotions. Like influence, they are not exclusive concepts, but are fluid states that change based on the situation.

**Moderation.** As a moderator within a family network, jewelry can strengthen the bond between the two "variables" of the receiver and the giver, primarily by adding a tangible aspect to memory. Family relationships change with the passing of the original owner, or as another person receives and passes on the ring. These networks might have otherwise disintegrated with the death of the giver, but are instead extended through a physical object. By providing a tangible reminder of an ancestor, jewelry can help its owner recall memories.

Each participant's ring evoked different memories of their ancestor. These ties between individuals, their memories, and their ancestor, and other family members become stronger or weaker based on a variety of factors. One of these factors is the presence (or absence) of heirlooms. Heirloom jewelry, especially, may begin as a passive instrument, but becomes an agent (and thus, an actant) once it begins to impact the relationships that are part of networks. In this capacity, it has the potential to grow in its moderation capabilities over time, ascending to the status of "heirloom," and developing greater sentimental associations.

Sentimentality is one aspect of moderation clearly exemplified by Sara's and Jane's rings. Simply stated, they have memories of their grandmothers, and they remember times with their grandmothers when they wear their rings. In turn, they have become attached to their rings because of their associated memories. These rings moderate interactions in a circular fashion.

Carmen's ring illustrates a different aspect of family hierarchy than Sara's and Jane's rings do, which sheds additional light on the relationships formed between family members through heirloom jewelry. Carmen received her ring as an in-law, and through this gift, her husband's aunt Lillian was likely demonstrating her approval of Carmen joining the family without expressly stating it. Carmen mentioned that she had been unsure of where she stood in Lillian's view, and in such a small family circle, it was a source of apprehension for her. With this in mind, Lillian's gift

of her mother's wedding ring is a huge gesture to cement a family relationship. The ring serves as a more linear moderating agent, exerting a connective force between individuals.

**Mediation.** As a mediator, heirloom jewelry can link a physical event to memories of a family member. This alternate type of connection supports an intense personal association between giver, receiver, and shared memories, as well as related occasions and traditions. In these examples, the heirloom jewelry piece takes on internal importance because of these relationships and events.

Family values and customs are ever-present in memory, but can also be represented materially. Metals and gemstones cannot universally express ideas by themselves, but they can certainly reflect them, particularly with regards to major life events. For instance, Jane's ring originated as a "mother's ring." The format of a "mother's ring" is easily recognizable: an arrangement of several gemstones of seemingly random – and often, clashing – colors would be an uncommon design choice in any other jewelry format. However, the idea that each stone's color represents a birth month, which in turn represents a person in the family, is easy to infer (especially with a bit of specialized knowledge). Although the birthstones do not tell anything about the represented children besides their birth month, they may remind the mother of the days of birth of their children, the occasion they received the jewelry (e.g., anniversary, after birth / "push present", Mother's Day, etc.), or specific attributes of their children. This is a general conclusion that can be made about any "mother's jewelry" set with birthstones of their children, and may or may not have applied to Jane's grandmother's experience.

However, for Jane, the ring holds different significance, because it is not her own "mother's ring" (i.e., with birthstones of her own children). Although the piece certainly reminds her of her aunts and uncles, her memories attached to the piece concern her grandmother's maternal nature, and of times spent with her grandmother. In Jane's case, specific physical events, including memories gardening with her grandmother, and of her grandmother's last days spent in the nursing home, remain present with her in part due to her ownership of the ring.

In a related way, Carmen's ring differs in its significance to her in contrast to its original purpose. From a design and style standpoint, a plain white gold diamond-channel band is a common wedding ring format, anniversary ring format, or simply a classic fashion statement. Without customized interior engraving that would reveal a hidden message, it would be impossible to independently verify what purpose the ring was originally intended to perform. However,

Carmen knows that it was Gram's wedding ring, and as such, it represents a significant event in Gram's life. Of course, Carmen was not present at Gram's wedding, but the ring is significant to Carmen because of its family associations.

The memories associated with heirloom jewelry determine its importance, rather than the original intent of the piece. Furthermore, by wearing jewelry and recalling these memories, the wearer's outlook on themselves is changed. Heirloom jewelry impacts the way ancestors are viewed by their descendants, giving a glimpse into their lives and interests. In these ways, heirloom jewelry exemplifies Verbeek's (2008) description of mediators changing human awareness and activity, regardless of a designer's original intent.

Often, jewelry is made with the intent to serve as adornment or as a fashion accessory. However, despite this intent, people often become attached to their jewelry, through sentiment, or through favoritism. Although jewelry does not directly change sensorial perception in same sense of Verbeek's (2008) examples of eyeglasses and x-ray images, it changes memorial perception. Additionally, its durability and longevity allow it to do so over a long period of time. Although each participant has only owned her ring for a short period, their rings have impacted their senses of identity and family history. In the present, their jewelry has helped them move on and settle in, but with continued ownership, their engagement with these concepts may change.

## **5.5 Recapitulation**

Within family history, heirloom jewelry becomes a functional art object, not only as a memorial item, but also an item with its own agency. Heirloom jewelry can function as a mediator and moderator of family networks, stabilizing or changing family narratives. These stories and narratives can be pleasant, linking to memories of happy times spent with an ancestor, but can also be unpleasant, potentially reminding the wearer of less savory aspects of family history. However, the positive and negative combine to make a stronger, more vibrant picture, strengthening associations between the present and the past.

Although none of the three rings described were altered or otherwise materially changed since their original owner's passing (e.g., no gemstones have been re-set into another jewelry format), the rings have each changed in use. For Jane, her ring helps moderate her current outlook on life in the city, rather than acting as a "mother's ring"; for Sara, although her ring was always intended as a gift for a granddaughter, it has become an important memorial; and for Carmen, her

ring has helped mediate a family relationship, changing her perception of place in a family network. In each of these narratives, the ring has translated into an actant.

Existing in memory and surviving in the modern day, heirloom jewelry lives in both the present and the past, and is part of family history both physically and conceptually. In a physical sense, heirloom jewelry functions as a memorial, connecting the living with the dead; conceptually, heirloom jewelry exerts influence and leverage on its owner within a family network, encouraging the re-telling of stories, perpetuation of interests, and accomplishment of goals. Jewelry, as an everyday object, functions not only as an ornamental accessory, but also in the capacity of an actant, reflecting interests, identity, and heritage.

## **Chapter 6: Conclusion**

### **6.1 Summary**

Jewelry exerts influence and leverage in social contexts. Within social settings, jewelry is a visible, everyday form of expression of culture, history, and identity. Heirloom jewelry, in particular, conveys family sentiment, and can serve as a reminder of loved ones who have passed on. Through its connections and associations, specifically its mediation and moderation of entities' relationships in networks, heirloom jewelry pieces can help perpetuate family history. This family-specific history, in turn, can be used to supplement broader cultural history.

This research analyzed three case studies of heirloom jewelry and family narrative. Although Carmen's, Sara's, and Jane's stories were unique, they shared many commonalities, including the importance of their jewelry serving as a connection to their ancestor. Discussing their jewelry pieces and relevant family history enabled them to view their own values and goals as a continuation of their families' efforts. Furthermore, their jewelry helped them build their own identity in relation to family dynamics and as an extension of family traditions.

Through the frame of Actor-Network-Theory (ANT), heirloom jewelry can be viewed as possessing symmetrical influence to humans in family networks. It supports the tension that maintains family relationships, and can even translate into an active component of family networks. Furthermore, it can leverage family situations, eliciting change in actions and emotions through mediation and moderation. In these roles, jewelry translates from an inanimate, passive instrument into an actant, performing knowledge and dynamically contributing to a network's structure.

The current research showed a small glimpse of heirloom jewelry's effects on family networks, and reflected a moment in time. Oral history has the potential to change over time, particularly with changing viewpoints as a result of personal experience, but that does not invalidate the history (Hoskins, 1998). The participants' relationships with, and to, their jewelry pieces are also likely to change over time, just as relationships between human entities are bound to evolve over time – another demonstration of the symmetry between human and non-human entities suggested by ANT, and of the tension present in relationships. Tension is apt to change, but the more tension that exists (positive or negative) between two entities, the more tightly they are connected together. In each of the three presented cases, the tension created between the participant, their ring, and the ring's original owner serves as a powerful influencing agent,



mediating and moderating relationships. Through this tension, a piece of jewelry changes from an actor into an actant, as it becomes an operational part of a family network without continuous external input.

Beyond the three participants' experiences, jewelry's continuing presence as a physical artifact since ancient times and its occurrence in both myth and contemporary narratives attests to its continuing cultural significance. It is an enduring, familiar part of daily life. Although jewelry performs many familiar traditional functions (including the traditionally understood functions of talismanic protection, and display of status), it also plays an active part in sustaining human relationships. Heirloom jewelry, although an inanimate object, influences and enacts culture. It can be a part of an existing tradition, or be a part of a new tradition – and through its continued existence, compel its successive owners to follow the same tradition. Without volition, it still possesses agency, which is enabled by its complementary material and contextual attributes.

The research exhibited a divide between available material context and historical context. In the three presented cases, the longevity and durability of the material allowed for historical context and associated memories to be shared, although the pieces themselves did not exhibit any clues to their origins. The material aspects of jewelry can allow historical context to be constructed, but material existence is not dependent upon context. That is, material objects can exist separately from context, but contextual attributes can make them more interesting objects of study. Together, the material and the contextual attributes of an object combine to allow an object to gain the status of “heirloom.”

As sentimental items, heirloom jewelry pieces can be viewed as relics. Objects, especially those understood as relics, can help illustrate other aspects of history more completely than exclusively literary explorations (Lowenthal, 1985). Most importantly, items with such a special status have the potential to capture interest in bygone eras. Within the field of art and museum education, this can be particularly useful: through the questioning of their origins and use, museum objects can be linked to everyday objects (Marshall, 2002).

Jewelry can be a useful item in educational settings, providing a tangible link to history while also relating to specific traditions and customs. Heirloom jewelry, in particular, can be useful to help recall memories pertaining to these customs. Connection of historical concerns with familiar objects in academic curricula can deepen students' topical engagement (Lawton & La

Porte, 2013). As such, object-based learning centered on heirloom jewelry could provide an insightful and useful way to engage with the arts, and the decorative arts in particular.

## **6.2 Limitations and Delimitations, Revisited**

This research does not seek to generalize across all heirloom jewelry owners' experiences, but to draw conclusions between the three cases presented. The small focus of this study, in both jewelry format and in participant demographics, allowed for strong associations to be formed between all three cases. These participant's experiences do not exclude the potential for other experiences to arise, or for other individuals to undergo similar events.

In each case, talking about one specific piece also brought up other possessions, exhibiting a relative aspect of ownership. Rings were a deliberate choice in that they can be attached to a cultural custom (e.g., weddings) but are not necessarily used for the same purpose across generations. "Heirloom" was specified as an object having been in the participant's family for two or more generations. The chosen case study methodology uses this potential limitation of a small focus and limited data set to its strength, describing experiences while not rejecting others.

The research's focus on rings as a specific format was useful to keep the study concise. This narrow focus allowed participants to focus on the effect of their ring on their memories, and on the construction of their identity. Their accounts showed that jewelry can possess agency: although the three rings were given as gifts (i.e., instruments), they become agents as they continue to affect their present owners. By focusing on rings, this study was able to identify the tensions present in family narrative, and how an heirloom piece can translate into an heirloom, affecting family history and sustaining a family narrative. This does not exclude the possibility that other heirloom jewelry can possess agency in the same way, but the similar effects shown by these pieces have allowed a rich account to emerge.

Perhaps the largest limitation of this research is the scarcity of material information available regarding the three participants' rings. Many rings, and jewelry pieces more generally, are indicative of time period through their make, manufacture, and styling. These three rings did not display specific styling indicative of a particular decade, or from a particular locale. Even the oldest piece – Carmen's white gold and diamond half-channel band, which is technically "vintage" (rather than the hundred-year designation of "antique") – is a classic style that is still commonly produced today. The three rings did not display makers' marks or hallmarks that would allow them to be dated specifically, and all of the pieces (although each would have been completed by a

skilled jeweler) appear to be mass-produced. Independent from their owners' stories, these three pieces had limited stories to tell.

Notably, the three participants did not focus on the material aspects of their rings. The information and consent form specified that I, the researcher, would not provide an appraisal of the piece, but I was still surprised that material questions arose only minimally. Each participant described her ring when asked, but they were less concerned in the metal content of the piece, identifying stones in the rings, or when they were made. The participants were more interested in telling about their memories associated with their ring and their families. With my professional training in jewelry production and appraisal, this still surprises me, even several months since the interviews took place – metal content, gemstone identification, monetary value, and time period of manufacture are the first things I wanted to research and know when I received my own heirloom jewelry. In these three cases, however, this seems to indicate that memories and associated history (i.e., contextual information) is of the highest importance to the owners.

### **6.3 Implications**

The greatest implication of this research is that material artifacts are more interesting, and most important to their owners, when they come with a story. Specifically, the material aspects of objects are most interesting when they can be placed in context. Context allows an object to translate from simply being an instrument, to an agent, to an actant – in this case, from a piece of jewelry, to a gifted piece of jewelry, into an heirloom. I do not believe the participants' focus on context over material during their interviews was because of a lack of vocabulary or familiarity (or expertise, for that matter), or even the material attributes of the rings themselves, but rather because the interpretation and understanding of a sentimental heirloom piece is so closely linked to personal interest and family heritage. The participants were eager to share their memories, and in their stories context trumped materiality. This context, and specifically the tensions between family members and between other objects, allow for their jewelry to affect their perceptions of memory and history and thereby effect the stabilization of a family network.

Family history and identity are interwoven concepts. A family network is a part of personal history, but the individual's ability to place themselves within this history also informs their own identity. As described by Sara, Jane, and Carmen, their own goals and interests were informed in various ways by their relationship to their ancestor.

**History and Material Objects.** The great irony of framing this research through Actor-Network-Theory is that the three rings enact the research. Through the rings' continued existence and presence in these women's lives, they have mediated and moderated the information that is shared by their owners. Rather than simply being passive instruments, they possess agency, influencing their owners' views on family structure, family history, and personal identity. These immaterial functions leverage their owners, changing their perceptions of who they currently are, who they were, and from whom they are descended.

Although I cannot know my participants' ancestors by viewing or holding their jewelry, I have learned more about them and their families by asking questions focused on a single, charged possession than I could possibly have by simply asking, "Could you please tell me about your grandmother?" Focusing a story with an object allowed these women's histories to open up, often pulling complex family dynamics to the fore. The three rings are charged by their placement within family networks – from personal memory to the memories of others, the associations between related family entities (both human and non-human) allow for tensions to form. This tension culminates into translation when the object gains the designation of "heirloom" – no longer is it passive, but instead it contributes actively to family history in some way. In this capacity, heirloom jewelry reaches its full potential, becoming an actant.

The implications of this research extend beyond the family sphere, but ultimately rely on the intense personal connection that is often a part of heirloom jewelry ownership. Of course, not everyone has the fortune to inherit an heirloom jewelry piece. However, most people own some form of jewelry – from earrings to belt buckles, jewelry is ubiquitous in modern culture, crossing socioeconomic and cultural divides. Although not universal in meaning or value, expression through adornment is a pervasive concept. By combining the study of history with familiar artifacts like jewelry, the study of both can be strengthened.

**Art and Museum Education.** Universality in presence – though not necessarily in meaning or value – when coupled with jewelry's relative durability and longevity, allows for a unique link between artistic and cultural history. Additionally, jewelry's familiarity and personal significance can connect personal history with wider socio-historical trends. This familiarity allows jewelry to be relevant for people of a variety of ages, and allows for the potential to be a useful educational tool in classrooms and museums.

This research also shows that unassuming objects can come with a great amount of memories and associations. The three rings presented in this research are familiar, everyday objects. Although they do not exhibit the fantastical history that, for instance, crown jewels displayed in a museum would, both simple heirloom rings and extravagant crown jewels have memories and associations attached. The difference in perceived importance, however, lies heavily in the owner's or viewer's relationship to the piece. Even though the rings described in this research were not of the finest quality or highest value, and therefore could be perceived as unremarkable, the relevant experiences and personally important memories associated with the rings show that even the plainest of heirloom objects can hold tremendous family significance.

Personal connections to artwork can help museum visitors interpret and understand unfamiliar objects (Marshall, 2002). Heirloom jewelry can be understood in this sense as a vernacular art object. Vernacular art objects are familiar and well-understood but “apart from, and thus subordinate to, the dominant discourse” (Garrett-Petts, 2000, p. 253). This discourse often focuses on “important” pieces of high value. Understanding different forms of jewelry in a relative sense is key: although many heirloom jewelry pieces are not of the same caliber of museum pieces, they were made with the same technologies, and operate within the same formats and traditional purposes that museum-held jewelry does. Furthermore, understanding that many museum objects began as functional objects from daily life can help make a conceptual connection (Vallance, 2008). By referencing their existing knowledge of various art media, museum visitors can use foundational knowledge to help them expand their understanding of decorative art objects from another time and place, but with similar intent. Bridging this gap in understanding will hopefully engender deeper interest in the decorative arts' production, collection, and understanding.

#### **6.4 Future Directions**

Heirloom jewelry functions as a mediator and moderator of family history. It perpetuates a variety of family narratives, unique to each individual, and can strengthen ties between family members both living and deceased. Whether a piece of heirloom jewelry is used by its successive owners as it was originally intended, or worn for a different purpose, it is a significant and durable part of family history. It has the potential to illustrate a variety of interests and customs, and supplement education in a range of capacities.

Jewelry is a functional art object, in material and in concept. As a decorative art, jewelry functions as adornment, but it can also express identity and reflect historical concerns. These

functions, in conjunction with its ubiquity and familiarity, make jewelry a useful educational tool. Jewelry crosses the boundary between art and daily life, and by studying and making objects with familiar functions – and of course, ultimately using them – a divide between the classroom or the museum and daily life could be lessened.

Performing specific, family-based functions, heirloom jewelry can help situate its owner within a larger network of people and objects, fulfilling the role of “actant” by performing historical information and affecting its owner’s perception of the world. Jewelry can mediate this perception by altering awareness, and moderate this perception by influencing its clarity. By understanding the connection between who we are and what we wear, we can better understand how our identity is related to our history, whether localized in family, or globalized in culture.

As an educator and artist, my aim is to support engagement with history through art, utilizing personal connections to better understand how and why specific objects are made and valued. My hope is that through this research, my participants have gained a greater understanding of the functions their heirloom rings play in their lives and family history. I also hope that you, my reader, will in turn reflect upon the social roles your personal possessions (whether heirloom jewelry or otherwise) may perform.

Further research in this line of study should consider investigating a broader spectrum of heirloom ownership, with participants from different walks of life and more diverse jewelry pieces. ANT is a useful frame through which to view the associations and functions of heirloom jewelry ownership, and would be advantageous for interpreting other heirloom objects in social settings. Beyond jewelry, other heirlooms would likely present a focus on other dimensions of relationships and social interactions, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the agency of objects. This research will hopefully engender interest in future investigations of a similar type, by serving as a foundation for understanding jewelry as a form of artwork that affects and enacts family networks, history, and identity.

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## Appendix A: Certification of Ethical Acceptability



### CERTIFICATION OF ETHICAL ACCEPTABILITY FOR RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

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Name of Applicant: Allison Cicero Moore

Department: Faculty of Fine Arts \ Art Education

Agency: N/A

Title of Project: Heirloom Jewelry: An Actant of History and Identity

Certification Number: 30005145

Valid From: October 15, 2015 to: October 14, 2016

The members of the University Human Research Ethics Committee have examined the application for a grant to support the above-named project, and consider the experimental procedures, as outlined by the applicant, to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. Pfaus".

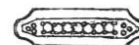
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Dr. James Pfaus, Chair, University Human Research Ethics Committee

## Appendix B: Ring Renderings



**Figure B1: Sara's Ring**



**Figure B2: Jane's Ring**



**Figure B3: Carmen's Ring**

